

PART 2

THE FAMINE

Causes of Famine

'Natural factors cause crop failures, but human beings cause famines'.
(William A. Dando, *The geography of famine* p. viii)

The blight, which first attacked the Irish potato crop in the autumn of 1845 introduced a new element into the history of Irish famine. The 1740-41 famine was caused by extremely harsh weather which prevented the peasants from getting the potatoes out of the ground. The blight introduced some novel and undesirable elements. While the probability of two exceptionally cold, or wet, or dry years succeeding one another is slight and the probability of similarly freakish weather conditions occurring for five consecutive seasons is minimal in Ireland, the blight could and did persist from one season to another remaining dormant in the soil through the winter months. In addition, the impact of disease was probably more immediate, more dramatic and more total than ravages caused by weather. Contemporaries invariably wrote about the suddenness with which the blight struck: fields which had been healthy and luxuriant one day, a mass of diseased plants the next. Land agent William Steuart Trench had planted potatoes on high land in King's Co.

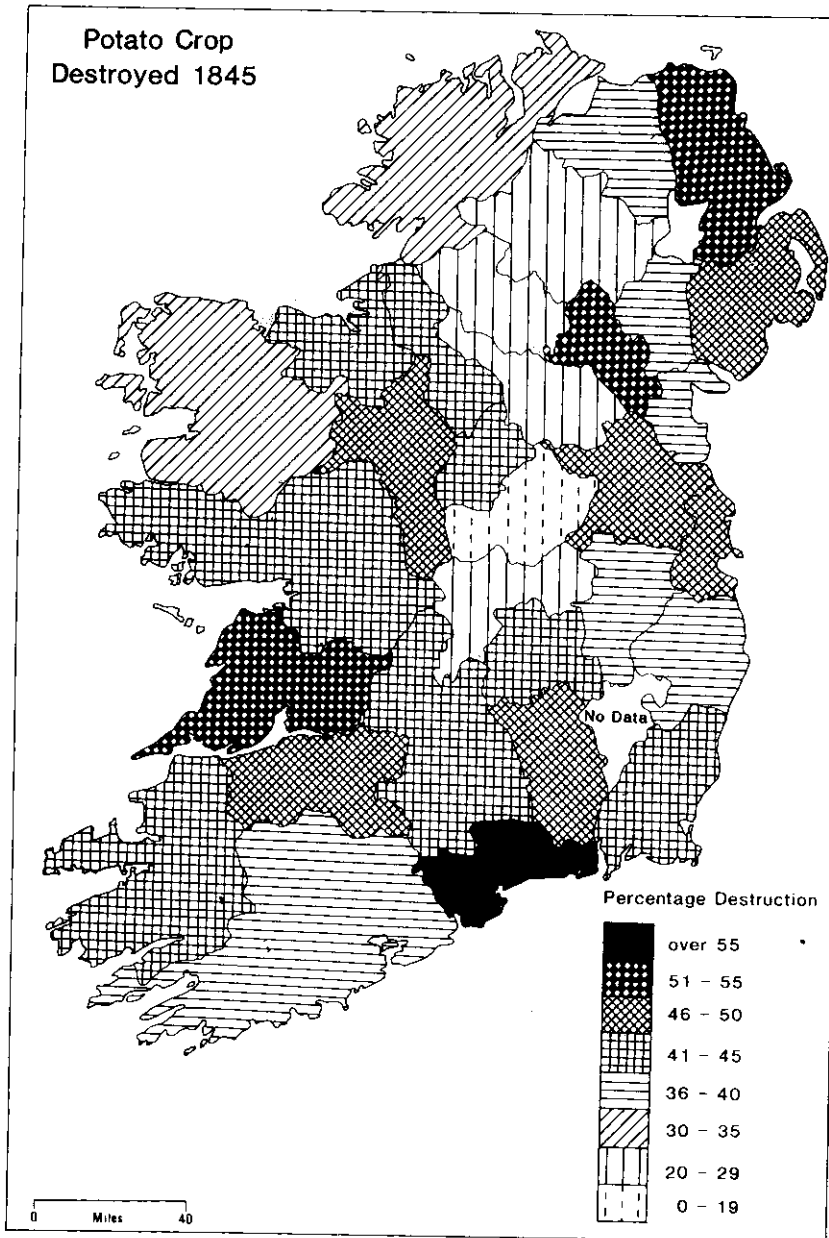
On August 6, 1846 - I shall not readily forget the day - I rode up as usual to my mountain property, and my feelings may be imagined when, before I saw the crop, I smelt the fearful stench, now so well known and recognised as the death sign of each field of potatoes. I was dismayed indeed, but I rode on; and as I wound down the newly engineered road, running through the heart of the farm, and which forms the regular approach to the steward's house, I could scarcely bear the fearful and strange smell, which came up so rank from the luxuriant crop then growing all around; no perceptible change, except the smell, had as yet come upon the apparent prosperity of the deceitfully luxuriant stalks, but the experience of the past few days taught me that all was gone, and the crop was utterly worthless. . . . It is enough to say that the luxuriant stalks soon withered, the leaves decayed, the disease extended

to the tubers, and the stench from the rotting of such an immense amount of rich vegetable matter became almost intolerable. I saw my splendid crop fast disappearing and melting away under this fatal disease.¹

Blight is caused by *phythopthera infestans*, a fungus which multiplies in hot, damp weather and can be quickly disseminated by wind or mist. Rainwater carries the spores from the leaves of the potatoes to the roots and causes the tubers to become infected. A whole field could be destroyed in a matter of hours. The disease could survive in a dormant fashion through the winter months in partially diseased tubers, which might be planted as seed potatoes, allowing the fungus to spread devastation during the following season. The fungus apparently came to Europe from South America on boats carrying guano, the newly-popular fertiliser. In the year 1845 the Netherlands lost approximately two-thirds of its potatoes, Belgium a staggering seven-eighths. Matters improved relatively rapidly. In 1846 Belgium harvested two-thirds of its normal crop, the Netherlands one third. The severe drought of the late summer of 1846 had succeeded in killing the blight. Deaths rose in both countries, though by considerably less than in Ireland.²

From the continent the potato blight spread to England and by the summer of 1845 it had reached the Isle of Wight. By August 1845 blight was found everywhere in England except the northern area, and by September 13 the first sighting was reported in Ireland in the vicinity of Dublin. It was carried to Ireland by south-east winds which blew frequently, if untypically, during the late summer and early autumn of 1845.³ On September 16 the constabulary was ordered to report weekly on blight damage in their area and by 16 October it had spread to seventeen counties.⁴

The incidence of blight in 1845 varied considerably between the different parts of Ireland. Using the constabulary reports we can gain an impression of the relative impact, though it must be noted that the figures used in Map 1 are undoubtedly an overestimate of the incidence. The most severely affected counties would appear to have been Waterford, Antrim, Monaghan, and Clare, while losses in the Dublin-Meath area and in Co. Down were high, as they were in the Limerick-Tipperary area and in Co. Roscommon and parts of Co. Galway. Losses in Mayo, however, were below average. The severity of the 1845 failure was reduced because the worst incidence was in the more prosperous eastern counties.⁵ Its impact was also mitigated by the fact that the blight did not spread widely until October-November, by which time the early potatoes had been lifted, in a year



when the early crop had been particularly prolific. Bourke estimates the total loss in 1845 at slightly less than one-third of the 1844 crop.⁶ The real devastation came in 1846 and subsequent years.

The 1846 crop would have been smaller than usual, because of the disease affecting the main crop potatoes which meant that seed potato was both scarce and of uncertain quality. On this occasion disease struck much earlier than in 1845. Warm damp summer weather was ideally suited to the spread of blight and by August reports of devastation came from every part of the country.⁷ Potato planting was later than in modern times and the new season's crop was generally not available until the end of July or beginning of August.⁸ By early August virtually the whole crop was threatened, though some areas escaped more lightly than others. The district of the Maharees and Castlegregory to the north of the Dingle peninsula was said to have suffered only partial destruction.⁹ Throughout the autumn and winter of 1846 there are reports of some potatoes coming to market in various areas and of children harvesting potatoes in the fields. However, the potatoes in question seem to have been small, immature and few in number. The combination of a lack of seed potatoes, though the Society of Friends supplied some, plus a belief by many experts that the Irish peasantry should be encouraged to concentrate on alternative crops such as turnips, combined with a shortage of field labour (see below) meant that the potato acreage planted in 1847 was extremely small though the yield was high and the crop virtually blight-free. The total crop, however, would seem to have been less than in the disease-ridden year of 1846. In 1847 the heaviest planting relative to 1845 would appear to have been maintained in counties such as Antrim, Armagh, Kerry, Queen's, Carlow, Kildare and Wicklow; the lowest relative to previous seasons in Mayo, Roscommon and Sligo. Clare and Galway were also well below the national average.¹⁰ In 1848, a year of substantially greater planting, blight returned in high season, though in a somewhat patchy fashion. The average yield per acre was somewhat over half that achieved in 1847; but figures much in excess of that were achieved in Wicklow, Donegal, Fermanagh, Kerry, Wexford and Mayo; the lowest yields by far were in a belt of counties in the midlands, Cavan, Longford, Meath, Monaghan, Dublin, Westmeath and Kildare,¹¹ though these were not the counties which suffered most during 1848. The following year, 1849, with a potato acreage reduced from the 1848 level and a respectable yield, might be deemed the first year of post-famine normality, though the pre-famine potato acreage was never regained, nor indeed were pre-famine potato yields—partly because of blight, but also because of the demise of intensive agricultural practices.

POTATO CROP AT TIME OF FAMINE¹²

	Acres (000)	Yield per acre	Produce (000 tons)
1844	2,378	(6.25) est.	(14,862) est.
1845	2,516	(4.0) est.	(10,063) est.
1846	1,999	(1.5) est.	(2,999) est.
1847	284	7.2	2,046
1848	810	3.8	3,077
1849	719	5.6	4,024

A shortage of food alone does not account for famine, nor does it explain who the victims will be. The Indian economist, Sen, estimated that in the famine year of 1943 in Bengal the total food supply was only 5% less than its average level in the five preceding years and that food supplies were actually 13% greater than in the year 1941 when there was no famine.¹³ In Ireland, however, food was genuinely scarce during the famine years. Bourke, working on an average consumption of twelve lbs. of potatoes per day per adult male cottier for 10½ months per year, estimated that a total of 7m. tons of potatoes were used each year for human food, with a further 2m. for seed and 5m. for animal food.¹⁴ On the basis of these figures it could be argued that the 1845 crop, though reduced, offered enough food for human consumption and seed, though it was not necessarily in the hands of those who most needed it and was not evenly distributed throughout the country. By any standards the potato tonnages of 1846, 47 and 48 were totally inadequate to meet the needs of the population. The most important question, however, is whether other food resources in the country might have provided an adequate alternative.

On the eve of the famine Ireland exported a considerable amount of grain. Solar has estimated that the pre-famine food exports could feed an average of 1-1¼m. people at English standards of consumption. The continuing export of grain during the famine years is a topic which has given rise to considerable nationalist criticism. John Mitchel alleged that every ship bringing relief supplies of grain into Ireland during the famine was likely to meet six ships leaving the country laden with grain.¹⁵ Bourke's figures suggest, however, that the grain exports of 1846 totalled approximately 285,000 tons, the food equivalent of slightly more than one million tons of potatoes, while the potato shortfall in that year was 'well over ten times that figure'. Imports during the ten months from September 1846 to June 1847 were about five times the volume of exports, totalling 659,000 tons, and on Bourke's estimates would have had the equivalent food value of approximately

2.5m. tons of potatoes, or one-quarter of what was needed. Total supplies of grain and potatoes were therefore inadequate; exports were much exceeded by imports, though food exports were concentrated in the autumn of 1846, imports in the period from December 1846 and the early months of 1847. Had the food exported during the autumn of 1846 been kept in Ireland it could have made an appreciable contribution to bridging the starvation gap between the destruction of the potato crop in August and the arrival of the first maize cargoes in the following winter.¹⁶

In addition to grain exports, livestock exports also continued during the famine years.

	1846	1847	1848	1849 ¹⁷
Oxen bulls cows	186,483	189,960	196,042	201,811
Calves	6,363	9,992	7,086	9,831
Sheep, lambs	259,257	324,179	255,682	241,061
Swine	480,827	106,407	110,787	68,053

Cattle exports rose steadily during the famine years but pig exports fell sharply because pigs were fed on potatoes. Few peasant families could afford to eat any quantity of meat even in normal years; pork and bacon were the meats normally eaten, beef was too expensive. The substitution of beef for potatoes would have been financially impossible and limits on livestock exports, or on grain exports, would probably have been counterproductive. Attempts to keep the food in Ireland by legislative decree would not have ensured that the food so held would have reached those most in need, while such restrictions would have probably deterred food imports. Ireland was short of food during the famine years and needed all possible imports. In fact, demands for controls on exports of food were negligible during the famine years.¹⁸

In normal years most Irish families were virtually self-sufficient in potatoes and only a small proportion of the total crop entered into commercial trade. The failure of the potato crop not only robbed families of their dietary mainstay, it also forced the Irish population to buy the bulk of their food rather than producing it themselves. Food had now to be acquired through cash transactions on a hitherto unprecedented scale. This placed considerable pressure on the monetary resources of the Irish banking system. One of the first government initiatives was to arrange an adequate supply of silver coin throughout the country.¹⁹ The food distribution system was also inadequate. It had hitherto coped primarily with food exports rather

than imports and in many areas large-scale cash or credit dealing in food appears to have been limited to the early summer months.

Faced with the scarcities of the famine years, food prices rocketed. Figures on food prices during the famine years are difficult to disentangle with any precision. Most available statistics deal with wholesale prices, generally in central markets such as Dublin. These fluctuated less dramatically than retail prices in more remote areas, while sources suggest that much higher prices were charged for small than for large quantities by local hucksters. Nevertheless, Barrington's price index gives some indication of the changes which took place, but it is worth noting that his figures are the arithmetical mean of prices for the year and so understate the increases by a considerable amount.

IRISH AGRICULTURAL PRICES DURING THE FAMINE YEARS

(1840 equals 100)

	1845	1846	1847	1848	1849
Wheat	98	131	98	87	66
Oats	118	187	107	196	83
Barley	118	175	116	100	85
Potatoes	88	323	254	292	215
Butter	92	105	99	87	74
Pork	92	117	149	115	88
Mutton	120	120	125	120	105
Beef	103	104	105	110	79

On the Fassaroe estate in Co. Wicklow, potatoes which had been 4/4 (21p) per barrel in 1844 averaged 17/8 (88p) in 1846, a four-fold increase, and are estimated to have touched 30/- (£1.50) at peak price.²⁰

Not surprisingly potatoes showed the largest price increase during the famine years, but oats and barley were obviously close dietary substitutes and their prices showed a sharp increase both in 1846 and in the later famine year of 1848. Wheat prices were much less affected, indicating that wheat did not form part of the normal Irish peasant diet, being too expensive. This is even more the case with respect to beef, mutton and butter prices which appear to have been almost impervious to the famine. Pork prices rose, partly reflecting their role in the peasant diet, but more likely because the cost of keeping a pig rose sharply with the shortage of potatoes.

Potatoes had been favoured by the Irish labouring class partly because they apparently liked them, but also because they were the cheapest staple foodstuff normally available. With the unprecedented rise in potato prices and scarcity of supply, the labouring population was forced to substitute alternative foods such as oats or Indian meal. Indigenous supplies of oats were grossly inadequate to meet the short-fall and Indian meal, the cheapest grain available on international markets, became the substitute staple during the famine years, and indeed for at least a generation thereafter. Contrary to popular opinion, Indian meal was not unknown in Ireland before the famine; there are records of it being imported into Ulster during the scarce season of 1800-2 when it apparently cost less than half the price of an equivalent quantity of oatmeal. It was also used during the scarce year of 1827 when Callan schoolteacher, Humphrey O'Sullivan, records its distribution, noting, 'Many people like it well: it will keep down the cost of living for the poor'. Pre-famine imports, however, remained small, further confirming the theory that during those years Ireland probably contained adequate supplies of food. Margaret Crawford estimates total imports between 1804 and 1844 at 29,432 cwts. compared with 5,833,014 cwts. during the famine years 1845-49.²¹ Even this considerable importation was inadequate, particularly during the winter of 1846 and the early months of 1847, when even Indian meal prices showed a sharp increase. Prices in the early months of 1846 appear to have averaged 1d per lb., or marginally higher; by the late autumn and winter of that year prices in excess of 2d were the norm, and peaks of 2.4 and 2.88d were recorded during January 1847 after which time prices began to drop sharply.²² Wicklow landlord's wife, Elizabeth Smith records in her diary for 26th September 1846, '2/8 (13½p.) for a stone of meal, I have known it at a shilling (5p.)'.²³

Unfortunately it is not possible to accurately relate the price of subsisting on Indian meal to the cost of surviving on potatoes in pre-famine years, but a doubling in the cost of a basic subsistence diet during 1846 could be taken as conservative; a trebling in subsistence costs in the period December 1846 - January 1847 is not improbable.

To the initial problem of supply one could add the dependence of the peasantry on local shopkeepers who were not averse to creaming off a substantial profit. Prices were highest for sales of small quantities. In Roscommon, in December 1846, meal cost 2/9 (14p.) per stone if bought in a one stone bag, or 3/4 (16p.) per stone if sold in pounds.²⁴ Some element of price competition, plus easier transport facilities, moderated price levels in the larger towns and cities; prices

were considerably higher in the more remote areas. It was estimated that prices in Lettermore, Connemara, were more than 25% higher than prices in Galway, a journey of twenty-six miles.²⁵ The absence of an established retail food market in the more isolated rural areas forced people to walk long distances, ten, twenty or even thirty miles to buy food according to one source, though small food traders invariably mushroomed, selling at prices often 30% above the already-high market price.²⁶ The dependence on shopkeepers' credit also increased real prices. Many workers found their earnings already fully committed in advance to repay the cost of credit dealings. However, with the persistence of famine conditions credit became more difficult to obtain.

It is the rise in prices which resulted from the scarcity of food, rather than mere food scarcity per se which is central to the Irish famine. Famines are caused, as the Indian economist Sen has pointed out, not by a shortage of food, but by a loss of entitlement to food. While the initial problem in Ireland was the failure of the potato crop, famine and excess deaths would not have occurred if the Irish peasantry had been able to command alternative food supplies at a price within their means. The evidence of the *Poor Inquiry* reveals that, in normal circumstances, the labouring and cottier classes had few surplus resources and most were forced to either get food on credit or to beg for some during the hungry months of the early summer. During the famine the rapid escalation of food prices put adequate nutrition out of the reach of labourers' pockets. On 24 February 1846 Elizabeth Smith's diary noted: 'Potatoes now 5d a stone. Jemmy Craig's - a labourer on a nearby farm whose total cash income was 2/- (10p.) plus *his* food. When rent 6d (2½p.) and tobacco 3d (1½p.) was paid there remained 1/3 (6p.) to buy food and clothing for his wife and three children - wife cannot do with less than ten stone in the week so 50d (21p.) per week on an income of 15d (6p.)'.²⁷ The following week when prices had risen even higher she noted that 'potatoes at their present price would take 9/- (45p.) a week. Labourers can earn a *maximum* 6/- (30p.)'. Food prices rose to considerably higher levels during the winter of 1846-7 and by the end of November she recorded that 'At present prices it would require 21/- (£1.05) a week to support a labourer and his family; he earns 6/- (30p.), 7/- (35p.) or 8/- (40p.) at the highest. What must be the result?'²⁸ This problem was universal among the labouring and small farming class. Board of Works official, Mr. Lowe, wrote from Timoleague in West Cork in January 1847 that

Indian meal and wheaten meal are both selling at 2/6 (12½p.) for 14 lbs. - a family of five persons cannot on wages of 6/- (30p.) per week have even two meals for four days in the week.²⁹ . . .

The purchase of food became the sole priority for the Irish poor and to do so they liquidated all available assets, borrowed where possible and economised on all other items. William Forster, who was investigating conditions in the west of Ireland on behalf of the Society of Friends, noted in Connemara:

When there before I had seen cows at almost every cabin and there were besides many sheep and pigs owned in the village. But now all the sheep were gone; all the cows, all the poultry killed; not one pig left; the very dogs which had barked at me before had disappeared; no potatoes, no oats, workmen unpaid; patient, quiet look of despair.³⁰ . . .

A report to the Society of Friends from Dunfanaghy, Co. Donegal noted that

The small farmers and cottiers had parted with all their pigs and their fowl, and even their bed-clothes and fishing-nets had gone for one object; the supply of food.³¹

A correspondent wrote from Arklow in February 1847

So long as the poor, that is the general class of inhabitants, had any articles whether of clothing, furniture, fish or agricultural implements to pawn the extent of distress remained unknown; but now that all is gone. . . .³²

while a Mr. Prendergast, an inspector of drainage for the Board of Works, writing from Carrigallen, Ballinamore, Co. Leitrim stated emphatically in February 1847

Famine actually prevails and deaths are frightfully numerous from want and disease caused by insufficient food and clothing. Some poor women were in the town before daylight last market day to conceal their bedding and few articles of furniture. They were *to be sold for a few days' food*. A man in the town, himself half stupefied by want and wandering in and out of doorways without asking for aid. A woman lately mentioned the excellent soup she had made *after killing her cow*, there being no other resource. Now that speaks volumes, for the pigs being already gone and the poultry too, there will remain absolutely nothing but the meal in the market for all provisions.³³

The impact of rocketing food prices spread widely. Fishermen, despite the undoubted food scarcity, found themselves without customers. Fish was regarded as a luxury; all available resources were

committed to buying potatoes, meal or bread³⁴ and Claddagh fishermen were forced to pawn their fishing equipment to survive.³⁵ Pawnbrokers also found themselves in difficulty. There were plenty of clients wishing to pledge items, but no buyers, and they found their capital locked up in unsaleable items.³⁶

While cottiers and labourers were the most immediate victims of the famine because of their greater dependence on potatoes as food and the lack of resources which they could sell to command food, small farmers were also severely affected. Many were forced to eat their grain as a substitute for diseased potatoes, or they had to sell farm animals, partly because with the loss of potatoes there was no food for pigs, because the high price of oats made feeding a horse prohibitively expensive or simply because they needed the money to buy food. Many who were not threatened with actual starvation suffered a sharp drop in their living standards as a result of the exceptional rise in the price of food and no longer had money to spend on other items. As the Central Relief Committee noted

Prices were so high that those who were still able to maintain themselves and their families could not afford to spend any money except on food. The small shopkeepers consequently lost their trade. The business of the wholesale dealer and merchant was diminished. The various branches of manufactures felt the want of demand; many of the work-people were discharged. Few houses were repaired or built, and masons, carpenters and other tradesmen connected with building were left unemployed. The demand for clothes, notwithstanding the great want of them, which was everywhere felt, decreased. Tailors, shoemakers and other tradesmen of this class accordingly suffered. The gentry whose rents were not paid, and who had poor-rates added to their other incumbrances, reduced their spending.³⁷

Not everyone lost as a result of the famine. Those with sufficient cash and acumen to buy grain in advance of maximum demand undoubtedly gained, as did larger farmers who found the increased cost of their food more than counterbalanced by the high prices which they earned from selling their surplus grain. Their diet would have been less dependent on potatoes than that of the small farmers and labourers, so that their cost of living would have risen by less than average, though heavier poor rates could take their toll. Small farmers generally lost out, first because in many cases they were net consumers rather than net producers of grain, but also because, even when they had surplus grain, they were forced to sell it early in the season, often

uncut, because of financial difficulties and so could not reap the maximum financial benefit. In February 1847 Elizabeth Smith noted

Provisions are rising every market. Thus the large farmer is doing well, his produce selling for three times the price of an ordinary year, his consumption though more costly, still very fairly proportional to his profit. The small farmer is ruined, he must let his corn, sell his stock at the unseasonable time because he has not fodder and therefore leave himself penniless for the coming year.³⁸

One Cork poor law guardian noted in January 1847 that even respectable farmers of thirty acres were 'suffering severely at present as they are obliged to consume in their families and in their stables the corn which in former years procured clothing and other comforts for them'.³⁹

Farmer-Labourer relations

The failure of the potato crop totally undermined the economic basis of rural Ireland and destroyed traditional relationships. Bound labourers or cottiers worked for farmers, not for direct cash payments, but to offset the cost of potato ground which they rented from the farmer; unbound labourers worked for cash but rented potato ground independently which they paid for either from wage earnings, or perhaps from the sale of part of their conacre crop. With the failure of potatoes a conacre plot became worthless since it could no longer guarantee food for the coming year. Labourers therefore saw little value in continuing to work for a farmer to pay the rent of a now-useless plot of land; many demanded payment in cash which alone would provide them with food, and, when farmers generally refused, they deserted to search for cash employment on other farms, in the towns and increasingly on public works. In Co. Cork this form of labourer militancy emerged in the autumn of 1845 with the first partial potato failure; in retaliation many farmers refused to rent conacre for the 1846 season unless labourers paid some or all of their rent in advance, a demand that few could meet. In consequence the Co. Cork conacre acreage fell by 20% in 1846.⁴⁰

The 1846 failure compounded this disruption as labourers deserted their plots and farm work en masse in search of ready cash and higher earnings elsewhere. With the sharp increase in the price of subsistence foodstuffs, the minimum cost of labour the cost of feeding workers rose. Farmers with live-in farm servants whom they fed or those who were paid a lower wage but provided with food, found the cost of feeding labour a major burden. One Board of Works official

based in Co. Cavan reported that 'the high price of food not only of itself aggravates it (distress) but compels farmers, who formerly used to give 4d a day and food, to discharge their labour'.⁴¹ Labourers who were not dieted were forced to campaign for higher wages in order to survive at a time when many farmers were themselves under financial pressure because of the potato failure. The pressure on farmers to increase money wages was compounded by the availability of jobs on public works schemes, jobs paying regular wages often at levels farmers could not afford. Complaints of a scarcity of labourers on farms were rife by the spring of 1847. The lower acreage of potatoes planted in 1847 reflected not only a shortage of seed, but also the disruption of old farming practices, notably the extensive use of labour which was paid in conacre ground. Complaints of a shortage of labour and the reduced crop acreage in 1847 tend to disprove the common assertion that pre-famine Ireland was overrun with unemployed workers made, for example, by Trevelyan in *The Irish crisis*

a fortnight planting, a week or ten days digging and fourteen days turf cutting suffice for his subsistence. During the rest of the year he is at leisure to follow his own inclinations.⁴²

The increased price of labour brought an end to many of the old labour-intensive practices, notably the careful manuring of potato ground with seaweed, sand and animal manure.⁴³ Larger farmers economised on labour as best they could. Hired labour was dispensed with. By the winter of 1846 several officers in charge of relief works reported an influx of labourers 'that have been during some time past, in constant employment of the farmers, not so much perhaps of their own pleasure as on account of the farmers refusing them further assistance'.⁴⁴ In the absence of hired labour, the volume of tillage farming fell. Many accounts of rural Ireland by the autumn of 1846, and increasingly in the spring of 1847, note the absence of tillage work in progress. In October 1846, Lt. Col. Jones wrote from Newry

The weather has been favourable; and the ground in a good state and not a single plough have I seen at work or any land being turned up by hand labour; all the land of the country appears to be laying fallow. The fields have the appearance of being deserted.⁴⁵

In many instances farmers substituted family for hired labour. One account from Co. Waterford early in 1847 noted

A plough is now occasionally seen on the farms but instead of labourers being employed the farmers' sons guide the plough. The farmers can scarcely be blamed for dismissing new servants, having so little food for themselves in very many instances.⁴⁶

The Changing Structure of Agriculture During the Famine Years

It was no longer possible to sustain pre-famine farming practices and in response to both the higher cost of labour and, no doubt, fears of falling grain prices in the aftermath of the repeal of the corn laws, there was a significant shift from tillage to pasture, particularly on large farms. Cattle numbers rose from 1,840,025 (excluding calves) in 1841 to 2,591,415 (including calves) in 1847 and further increased to 2,917,949 by 1850 -- a process which continued in subsequent years. However cattle numbers fell on smaller holdings, rising sharply on those over thirty acres.

CHANGING CATTLE NUMBERS BY SIZE OF FARM⁴⁷

	1847	1850	% change
Farms under 1 ac.	39,742	27,093	- 31.8%
1-5	83,389	68,168	- 18.3%
5-15	391,155	398,458	+ 1.86%
15-30	545,772	583,152	+ 6.85%
30 plus	1,482,951	1,847,315	+ 24.6%
Total	2,591,415	2,917,949	+ 12.6%

Some of the decline on the smaller holdings, and the corresponding increase on the larger reflects a shift in average size of farm, but this only confirms the general picture of a shift from more labour-intensive tillage farming, as practiced on smaller holdings, to more capital-intensive grazing.

The change was not only attributable to the departure of labourers from the larger farms. Small farmers who generally survived on a potato diet and sold grain for cash to pay their rents were forced during famine years to consume the grain themselves, and, with nothing left to pay their rent, tended to neglect their farms in the belief that eviction was inevitable in the near future.⁴⁸ Faced with the need to devote more of their farm output to feeding their families, many small farmers no longer felt that their holdings were viable at existing rents. One public works official wrote in the spring of 1847

There are no signs of a desire on the part of the holders of ten acres and under to cultivate their land. They say that rents are too high and as they could barely afford to pay them in good seasons with potatoes they will be utterly incapable of

doing so if their land is sown with grain. They therefore consider it better to earn something on the roads (which all goes into their pockets) than to incur the expense and liabilities for the benefit of others.⁴⁹

Financial hardship also left such men without capital; they were forced to sell off livestock, or were already so in debt that they were unable to borrow funds for seed and other agricultural necessities. The decline in the number of small farms is therefore not surprising, even ignoring the active role of the landlord in evicting farmers, which we will examine later.

CHANGING SIZE AND NUMBER OF FARMS 1845-51⁵⁰

	1845	1851
1-5 acres	181,950	88,083
5-15 acres	311,133	191,854
15 plus	276,618	290,401
Total	769,701	570,338

The Government's Response

As previously indicated, this was not the first time that Ireland had sought assistance in time of threatened famine. Since 1816-17 there had been regular injections of state assistance, primarily in the west of Ireland, to meet seasons of scarcity. In addition, British charitable agencies had made generous contributions. By 1845 the Irish problem was being seen as a chronic social problem to be resolved by a major restructuring both of Irish agriculture and of rural society: a restructuring designed to contain the seemingly endless population increase and bring Irish society into the nineteenth century. Trevelyan, the assistant secretary to the treasury, and one of the key figures in famine relief administration wrote in his book *The Irish crisis*

The relations of employer and employee which form together the framework of society, and establish a mutual dependence and good-will, have no existence in the potato system. The Irish small-holder lives in a state of isolation – the type of which is to be sought for in the islands of the South Sea, rather than in the great civilised communities of the ancient world.⁵¹

The Anglo-Irish landlords were seen as primarily responsible for perpetuating this 'primitive' system by tolerating rampant subdivision

and rapid population growth on their estates. Elizabeth Smith, the Scottish-born wife of a modest Wicklow landlord, wrote in her diary

The Irish landlord is in no essential different from the Irish peasant – his superior position has raised him in many points above his labouring countryman but the character of this race is common to all. The same carelessness or recklessness, call it what you will – the same indolence, the same love of pleasure, the same undue appreciation of self. The landlords that are not popular are what we should call the good ones who look after their affairs.⁵²

Irish famine was therefore increasingly seen not as an act of God, but as the nemesis for landlord indifference and neglect. Trevelyan wrote that the Irish landlords alone 'had it in their power to restore society to a safe and healthy state'.⁵³ With such views in common currency the prospect of London footing the entire bill for Irish famine relief was remote: it would be placed as far as possible on the shoulders of those who were responsible for the disasters – the Irish landlords. Thomas Drummond's ringing injunction to the Tipperary landlords, 'property has its duties as well as its rights', had a considerable financial sting in its tail.

By the mid 1840s Ireland faced the problem that its appeal for famine relief was no longer a novelty, while the dramatic impact of harrowing accounts of Irish poverty was beginning to wear thin. There were some allegations – how true it is difficult to say – that accounts of distress in the west of Ireland had been magnified in order to maximise relief. Power le Poer Trench, Church of Ireland archbishop of Tuam, who was heavily involved in relief operations in the west wrote

Starvation is now become a trade, and provisions are sent in abundance where no calamity occurred and where there is no extraordinary need to warrant it. The cry is, as the provision is going, why should not that parish get its share. . . . Places that I know were never in less want than they are this year have received large supplies of meal.⁵⁴

By the time of the famine in the 1840s the British government had also come to distrust alarmist reports of famine in Ireland. Sir Robert Peel apparently believed that all reports from the executive in Ireland needed careful scrutiny because 'a haze of exaggeration covered Dublin Castle like a fog'.⁵⁵

In rural Ireland, concerned individuals, particularly landlords who had been actively involved in famine relief and fund raising in the past, were less forthcoming. Many felt that they were making an adequate contribution to the poor via the rates paid to finance the

new workhouses and scaled down their charity accordingly. Elizabeth Smith, as early as 1841, noted increasing difficulty in raising funds at her local church for the protestant poor of the area, because people argued that they were already saddled with some of the burden of relieving the poor, who had been neglected by their absentee or less socially-responsible neighbours.⁵⁶ Sir Randolph Routh, who carried major responsibility for Irish famine relief, told Trevelyan in 1846 that 'a great many landed proprietors had refused altogether' to subscribe to famine relief schemes.⁵⁷

Increased sectarianism and allegations of soupierism also disrupted local relief efforts, though many protestant clergymen were actively involved in famine relief during those years. Almost all the grants given by the Society of Friends were locally administered by Church of Ireland clergy. Many of these clergy and their wives manned soup boilers, while catholic priests were constantly engaged in administering the last rites to dying people.⁵⁸ Evidence of Church of Ireland involvement is best indicated by the fact that, in the year 1847, forty protestant clergy died from famine fever, while the famine also claimed the lives of many catholic clergy. Some relief work was carried out by joint co-operation between catholic and protestant clergy, but divisions were all too common both between clergy of different religions and between influential local laymen. Applications for famine relief from individuals, rather than committees, were common, and Bowen noted that, during the famine years, 'Catholic Protestant suspicions often led to the breakdown of this tradition of self-governing aristocratic method of government'.⁵⁹ This breakdown lessened the efficiency of local relief efforts and in the process probably cost lives.

This lack of social cohesion coupled with the British belief that Ireland and Irish landlordism were in need of a severe shock undoubtedly served to weaken the effectiveness of response to the great famine. Some saw the crisis and suffering as almost inevitable. Thus Elizabeth Smith, when food prices reached their peak in January 1847 wrote

I don't know what will become of us before spring. We have no right to look to rich England for help, no right to expect the government to take charge of our private affairs. We have brought our miseries upon ourselves; a long series of improvident management results in ruin.⁶⁰ . . .

The existence of such beliefs among Irish landlords coupled with the strong social and political divisions prevailing in the country, plus O'Connell's personal antipathy towards Sir Robert Peel, meant that there was no strong political demand made from Ireland, even by a

section of the Irish political leadership, for Irish famine relief to become a United Kingdom charge. Such a possibility was further reduced by the fact that the Scottish highlands were also threatened by famine, while the mid 1840s were a time of undoubted social distress in industrial England.⁶¹ For some of those involved, such as Trevelyan, the famine was retrospectively viewed as a providential suffering designed to reform Irish society. In words reminiscent of a Calvinist preacher he wrote that 'on this as on many other occasions, the Supreme Wisdom had educes permanent good out of transient evil'.⁶² Against this complex social and political background, and given the magnitude of the economic and social upheaval which resulted from the potato failure, the question of government famine relief becomes immensely complicated.

Government Famine Relief Policy

Food Depots

Sir Robert Peel, the British prime minister when potato blight first appeared in 1845, was undoubtedly the British politician with the greatest experience of Irish social problems. As a young chief secretary for Ireland in 1817 he had initiated the relief measures of that year.⁶³ According to his biographer, Norman Gash, already by October 1845 Peel had 'virtually made up his mind that he was facing a major disaster in Ireland'.⁶⁴ His response to the Irish famine, however, became inextricably bound up with the repeal of the corn laws, which had restricted the free importation of grain into the United Kingdom. Peel had already decided that the corn laws, the last barrier towards complete free trade, must be removed.⁶⁵ The Irish famine merely provided the justification for that step and in practice was 'little more than a side issue' in the major political debate over free trade in food.⁶⁶ Its greatest consequence may have been the split in the British conservative party which resulted in the fall of Peel's government in June 1846 and its replacement by a Whig government led by Lord John Russell.⁶⁷

Peel's response to the potato failure has generally been favourably regarded in Ireland -- a matter of some interest given the strong hostility which most of his measures aroused. The phrase from the generally-hostile *Freeman's Journal* that 'no man died of famine during his administration'⁶⁸ is frequently quoted. He has been praised for showing 'an initiative unusual in that era of laissez faire and (because) he undertook tasks at variance with current economic theory'.⁶⁹ Perhaps his personal experiences of being in Ireland during the earlier

shortage of 1817 gave him a degree of emotional involvement which the following outburst would seem to indicate.

Good God, are you to sit in cabinet, and consider and calculate how much diarrhoea, and bloody flux, and dysentery, a people can bear before it becomes necessary for you to provide them with food.⁷⁰ . . .

On the other hand, Peel was only dealing with a partial food failure: there was probably enough food in the country in 1845-6 to feed everybody and small farmers still held assets in the form of savings and livestock. The dizzy rise in food prices did not begin until the autumn of 1846, after Peel had left office, though the food price stability may be partly due to the operation of his government food depots. Indian meal prices remained virtually stable at 1-1.2d per lb. until the autumn of 1846; wheat prices averaged 47/- per cwt. on the market in August 1846 but reached 70/- by January 1847 and 100/- by the following May.⁷¹

Peel's relief measures in 1845-6 were not remarkably dissimilar to those which he had introduced in 1817, or from those which had been used, with apparent efficacy, during the intervening years. A relief commission representing army, police and coastguard services, the poor law commission and Dublin Castle administration, with distinguished scientist Sir Robert Kane as token catholic, was established to organise food depots and stimulate the formation of local committees which would organise relief works.

The establishment of food depots and the secret purchase of stocks of Indian meal on the international market through the London bankers Baring Bros. are the items of Peel's relief policy which have generally attracted most praise, particularly when contrasted with the more dogmatic approach to the role of government adopted by the subsequent Whig administration. In November 1845 Peel and Goulburn, his chancellor of the exchequer, ordered that £100,000 be spent on buying Indian corn for secret shipment and storage in Ireland and this decision was implemented even before treasury sanction had been obtained.⁷²

Ultimately over £185,000 was spent on the food scheme, over £105,000 on purchasing food in the U.S., almost £46,000 on buying stocks of Indian meal and oatmeal in Britain and £6,544 on buying oatmeal in Ireland. The remainder went on freight and grinding corn.⁷³ Of the total, £135,000 was recovered from sales. Food was sold through government depots, either in small quantities to private customers or to local relief committees for resale. Police and

coastguards operated sub-depots in areas which lacked local committees, notably in the west of Ireland.⁷⁴ The supply of food from government depots, generally sold at cost price as a mixture of Indian meal and some oatmeal, was designed not to provide for the whole market, but to act as a brake on the tendency of local traders to increase prices unduly. Total stocks represented only two week's food for one million people, while the fact that depots did not open until the late spring of 1846, the first on 28 March, some not until June,⁷⁵ indicates that the pressure on food supplies was not unduly severe.

In fact private enterprise was not unsuccessful at responding to the Irish food shortage during the 1845-46 season. Indian meal imports, a mere trickle in previous years, rose very sharply during 1845 and early 1846; of these Peel's much publicised contribution, none of which arrived before February 1846, amounted to a 'mere trickle', at most perhaps ten per cent. One author has stated that 'the extent of government interference with the grain trade was trifling in comparison with the overall figures'.⁷⁶ In addition, local relief committees also organised food depots, devoting a considerable proportion of the £112,000 which they raised in subscriptions and £104,000 provided in government loans to that purpose.⁷⁷

Peel's government fell in the summer of 1846. Faced with a total potato failure the Whig government did not continue his policy of direct government importation of food, perhaps because of a greater ideological commitment to laissez-faire economics and partly because circumstances in the autumn of 1846 were considerably more difficult. In 1845-6 Peel's policy of purchasing food may have been successful (it is in fact difficult to estimate its precise contribution) but by 1846 the government had lost the element of surprise and secrecy. The government depots angered small traders as one official described

A feeling of jealous anger was aroused at first among the small dealers against the government, men who living as wretchedly to all appearances as the rest of the community nevertheless possess some money to lay it out in meals or potatoes.⁷⁸

Private traders apparently threatened not to import food into Ireland unless the government gave an assurance, duly given in the early autumn of 1846, that it would not continue its food imports.⁷⁹ In fact the government food depots were retained in the west of Ireland, and contrary to its promise the government did import some food to provision these depots.

Obtaining sufficient food for the limited number of depots proved difficult. The autumn and winter of 1846-7 was a time of considerable scarcity throughout Europe. High prices on the continent caused grain shipments from the Black Sea to be landed in France or Belgium rather than England, while with a buoyant food trade shipping costs for grain from either the U.S.A. or the Black Sea rose sharply.⁸⁰ Britain was also affected by food scarcity and by a major industrial depression which lasted until 1849.

In October 1846 Trevelyan wrote of his determination

without being in the least deterred by considerations of expense to establish as many meal stations in the west of Ireland as we can hope to keep regularly supplied; but there is another consideration which must put a general limit to our operations in this respect, which is, that this year there is a general scarcity over the whole of the U.K. . . . to buy up without restraint supplies intended for the English and Scotch markets would merely have the effect of transferring the famine from one country where the people are fed out of the public purse to one where they are struggling to maintain themselves; and it would not be tolerated that the English and Scotch labourers should not only have to support the Irish labourers (for it is always the mass of the population which pays the bulk of the taxes) but that the price of necessaries of life should also be raised upon the former to a famine price by an unrestrained consumption of those in Ireland.⁸¹

In fact the government only managed to import a total of 4,800 tons for its stores in the west and resisted pressure in later months to extend food depots into eastern counties on the grounds that they had failed to gain sufficient supplies even to fill the existing depots.⁸²

There were therefore genuine practical difficulties to repeating Peel's food policy and it remains questionable whether activity on his scale could have had any significant effect in the much more critical conditions of 1846-7. Peel's depots had not opened before the end of March, by October 1846 an engineer in charge of public works in Borris in Ossory (not the most destitute part of the country) wrote

Unless actually seen, it is difficult to form a correct conception of the wretched state in which the labourers and many of the poor farmers now are. It is not a very unusual thing for men who have been only a few days on our works to work all day without eating one morsel but during the hours for breakfast and dinner, lie down behind a fence, unwilling to be seen by those who have something to eat.⁸³

Many saw government non-interference in the food market as desirable to produce the maximum level of supplies. The new Irish chief secretary, Henry Labouchere, wrote to Daniel O'Connell that 'the great object at this moment appears to me to be to protect the trade in food'.⁸⁴

Precisely how much food was in the country was a matter of debate. Several accounts from officials involved with relief works in the autumn of 1846 speak of haggards and barns full of unthreshed grain. According to British prime minister, Lord John Russell, farmers, who the previous year had sold their corn early at comparatively low prices and then seen prices rise sharply, were reluctant to repeat the experience.⁸⁵ It was felt that non-interference in the market, letting food prices rise, would attract the sale of available produce and encourage imports. The endorsement of the primacy of the unrestricted food market was not limited to the Whig government. Fr. Theobald Mathew, the temperance friar, in the course of a letter complaining about the number of public houses which had opened up in the vicinity of relief works wrote

I feel pleasure in stating that the non-interference of the Government in the purchase of corn, though productive of much suffering has eventuated in an abundant supply of grain. Prices are rapidly declining; and I confidently hope that our population will enjoy a comfortable and comparatively happy Christmas.⁸⁶

The good friar was a poor predictor of price trends; prices soared in midwinter, peaking towards the end of January. The Society of Friends, whose charitable endeavours have occasioned much praise in most accounts of the famine, was equally committed to protecting the private food market, even in the west of Ireland. They considered the possibility of sending food to the west but

After considerable discussion it was decided that it was not desirable to make shipments of any of those articles in which merchants usually dealt. We felt the propriety of leaving the supply of the market to private traders.⁸⁷

Instead of meal they supplied rice to starving western peasants, confident that they were not directly competing with the food trade of local hucksters.

Public Works

Given the various problems, real or imaginary, associated with food distribution, the main burden of famine relief rested with the tried and trusted remedy of public works, a remedy which had been used

on an almost regular basis in the previous thirty years. In 1846, as in previous seasons, the administrative burden for supervising public works fell primarily on the Board of Works. The British cabinet decided that public works should be jointly financed, with half the cost coming from local taxation, the balance in the form of a treasury grant. Legislation allowing for this was passed in March 1846, while Peel also introduced measures to encourage land drainage and the construction of piers for the fishing industry.⁸⁸ Applications for government finance were forwarded by the local grand juries, (the bodies responsible for levying rates); the Board of Works then examined the proposed schemes and approved or rejected the loans. Employment was given to those with relief tickets from local relief committees -- bodies generally consisting of active local landlords, or their representatives, local clergy and any others who had made donations to famine relief schemes. In the late spring of 1846 road works and river drainage schemes commenced throughout most Irish counties. Ultimately a maximum of 97,617 were employed and, by August 1846, works were in progress in every county except Derry, Tyrone, Fermanagh, Armagh and Down. In addition some of the local committees operated their own relief works. By August 1846 there had been claims for works costing £1,292,853-8-7 of which £458,143-13-6 was sanctioned.⁸⁹

Public works were deemed necessary to provide the labouring population with sufficient money to buy food. Officials realised that measures to increase food supplies alone would not prove sufficient. Dobree, the deputy commissary, wrote in March 1846

Although the large rations of food on private account must increase the means of supply in the country I scarcely see how they will operate in relieving the distress unless wages available for labour are within the paupers' reach.⁹⁰

Awareness that government money was available for relief works led to the inevitable rash of applications. The barony of Moyarta in Clare submitted a total of 96 road schemes, neighbouring Inchiquin 113.⁹¹ Galway commissioners demanded money for sewerage, or for a new barracks; Limerick wanted money for a railway line. In the autumn of 1846 when relief works were resumed after summer suspension, virtually every obscure prospective Irish railway company wrote in search of government funds.⁹² Col. Jones, public works commissioner, was highly critical of the whole process.

It appears to be a system for each barony to apply for as much money as they think the Government will grant . . . memorials are not sent in until the demands for work become pressing. . .

while they had received demands from areas 'when that same day's post has brought up reports from an officer in the same district that there is no immediate necessity for work'.⁹³ Charges of excessive dependence on the government were common. Thus Mr. Dobree wrote to Trevelyan from Waterford

From all that I can collect no measures whatever have been adopted in any part of this district (beyond private charities) to afford relief when the crisis may come. It appears evident that those persons on whom the moral responsibility is constitutionally vested are doing nothing more than thinking upon what the Government is going to do, intending thereby to oblige Government to take the initiative and to throw the onus upon their shoulder.⁹⁴

Sir Randolph Routh, the commissary general, wrote to Trevelyan that his impression from various relief committee meetings was that people tended to 'apply to the Government first and then to subscribe afterwards'.⁹⁵ Several areas failed to establish relief committees; in other cases committees divided into factions there were disputes among a relief committee in Kilkee, Co. Clare as early as January 1846. In 1845-46 there is some impression of government officials attempting to remedy shortcomings in the local committee system, establishing food depots and endeavouring to shore up inadequacies. There is little doubt, however, that relief works were established, not simply on the basis of need, but in response to active local lobbyists. Reviewing the position in July 1846, Jones noted

There is no doubt that many works were commenced without necessity. It is true that the representations were extremely urgent and pressing and very great precautions and judgement were necessary.⁹⁶

Officials were faced with trying to distinguish between exceptional need due to potato failure and the normal distress which characterised Irish rural society.

An examination of the breakdown of expenditure on relief works in the period up to August 1846 suggests some relationship between allocation and above-average potato failure. Co. Clare, for example, received much the largest amount of public works money, over £75,000, followed by Co. Galway with almost £64,000. The generally prosperous county of Antrim received £14,000 -- mostly at the beginning of relief operations, no doubt reflecting heavy potato failure, but other apparently badly affected counties such as Monaghan or Waterford received very small sums indeed, Monaghan a mere £1,100. Co. Roscommon which appears to have been relatively severely

affected received only about 40% of the sum granted to Co. Clare when allowance is made for their respective populations.⁹⁷ However these imbalances in relief expenditure do not appear to have occasioned major grievances, nor is there evidence that areas poorly served by relief works suffered significantly more than other areas. The greatest indicator of the lack of real pressure in 1845-6 is the fact that relief works did not begin until the late spring; by 31 March only £70,325 worth of works had been approved,⁹⁸ yet there is no evidence of excess deaths in the first two-thirds of 1846.

The transition from Tory to Whig government in June 1846 did not bring any immediate change. A treasury minute of July 1846 ordered that relief works were to be brought to an end unless they were required 'for the relief of urgent distress', though schemes could be continued if the grand jury was prepared to bear the full cost of the extra works.⁹⁹ The desire to halt public works was motivated not purely by a desire to save money, or to preserve *laissez-faire* principles, but because of an awareness that by August the harvest had to be saved and that men who would normally do such work had been diverted to public works. One official wrote to the Board of Works that unless public works were suspended 'the harvest will not be finished cutting and, what is as bad, *enough turf will not be cut*.'¹⁰⁰ However reports by early August that the potato crop had been totally destroyed by blight made another season of relief works almost inevitable.

The experience of 1845-6 had been somewhat misleading as a guide to the following year. Matters were dramatically different in the autumn and winter of 1846-47. The apparent success of the relief methods of the spring of 1846 appear to have engendered the belief that traditional famine relief measures would again prove sufficient to meet the Irish crisis. This was certainly the opinion of Board of Works commissioner Jones in May 1846.¹⁰¹ The operations of spring 1846 had also given rise to some scepticism in both Board of Works and the treasury about the genuineness of Irish allegations of distress. Peel's legislation, which had provided grants from central funds equal to half the cost, was deemed to have encouraged excessive demands for public works. The new legislation passed in the autumn of 1846 provided that half the cost would be levied on grand juries, the balance to be provided by central funds, but in the form of a loan rather than a grant. All the cost was ultimately to be borne by local taxpayers. Local committees were regarded as having exercised undue authority over the choice of workers who were employed; their authority was now to be limited to drawing up lists of eligible workers with the final choice and responsibility for scrutinising the list lying with Board of

Works inspectors. The board itself was expanded from three to five members, a reflection of its increased powers.¹⁰²

The majority of relief works were to consist of road works, as they had in previous years, while care was to be taken to ensure that public works would not convey undue benefit on any one individual. There was considerable pressure from Irish landlords to include drainage works within the provisions of the act. Board of Works commissioner Jones wrote of

the drift of all the various suggestions made by the deputations which is to obtain money for improving their estates, without their giving any personal undertaking for its repayment.¹⁰³

In October it was provided that landlords could borrow from the relief fund for drainage purposes but they became responsible for the full repayment. Some drainage schemes were implemented, but they amounted to only 5% of the total cost of relief works.¹⁰⁴ The low proportion was a consequence, perhaps, of the bureaucracy involved, as O'Neill suggests, but also of the fact that landowners were reluctant to borrow money for private schemes when they knew that they would also be burdened with the cost of general relief works. Schemes which seemed attractive if the government or the general community paid the bill became less so when the landlord was made directly responsible.

Efforts to assist Irish railways through relief works were even less successful. The government was deluged by requests for financial assistance under the guise of famine relief from countless small railway companies. Government objections were raised on the grounds that English and Scottish railway companies would demand similar assistance, and that the measure would be more beneficial to railway shareholders than to distressed labourers; it was estimated that only one-third of the total cost would accrue to labourers, with most of the money being spent on materials.¹⁰⁵ However, the alteration which provided loans for private drainage schemes also covered railways, though only one company—the Waterford and Limerick railway company—took advantage of the provision.¹⁰⁶

The administration of public works in the autumn and winter of 1846 posed insuperable difficulties. The potato crop had almost totally failed and the price of food rose sharply. Countless labourers and small farmers, knowing that no food remained, deserted the land in search of money wages. Pressure for relief works emerged at a considerably earlier date than in the previous season; the total number employed reached a peak of 750,000 in the spring of 1847. The administration of works on such a scale posed enormous problems which were

compounded by the fact that works were widely scattered, many were in the most remote areas, and administrative staff were often new and inexperienced. Allegations of bureaucratic delays were common. On 14 December 1846 Rev. Jeremiah Sheahan, P.P. Clinlaurence, west Cork, wrote that on 18 September a presentment of £6,000 had been granted for employment of destitute workers, but that not one farthing had been spent.¹⁰⁷ Allegations of delays in getting money which had been sanctioned to remote areas were common;¹⁰⁸ government pay clerks were apparently reluctant to penetrate into remote areas such as Skibbereen.¹⁰⁹

Faced with the clamour of distress much of the administrative machinery broke down. Lt. Col. Jones wrote rather despairingly to Routh, that 'what was possible and practicable with 50,000 men is no longer so with seven times that number'.¹¹⁰ The most vital area was the allocation of employment. It was intended that local committees would draw up lists of those in need which would then be vetted by the Board of Works inspectors, but that system proved almost inoperable. The problems reflected the difficulties of depending on public works as the principal method of famine relief, combined with the greed, self-interest or desire for political authority of local individuals. One harrassed official wrote from Co. Monaghan

it is now only too apparent that no assistance is to be expected from the farmers, and little if any from the landed proprietors; in fact in many instances, they are purposely throwing the labourers entirely on the public works; the clergy of all denominations are pressing for employment for their followers in the same way; in short I am beset morning, noon and night, by hundreds of them; and of late some impatience has shown itself. The Relief Committees have done little as yet but provide enormous lists of applicants for labour and are very dissatisfied when I object to them.¹¹¹

Many landlords dispatched their tenantry to the public works in the hope that they would earn enough to pay their rents.¹¹² Others claimed that a landlord's tenants were given work places in proportion to the amount of taxation which he had paid.¹¹³

As a result of such interference many of those employed on public works were large farmers or their sons, while some of the most deserving were turned away. In Corofin, Co. Clare, the Board of Works inspector, Capt. Wynne, a man who was to suffer assault and an assassination attempt, discovered 'at least one hundred cases where the comfortable farmer has been left on the list, while his neighbour, possessed of nothing in the world but his spade and his limbs, has been

struck off'. Similar experiences were reported from Clare Abbey and Kilmeady.¹¹⁴ In fact representatives of more prosperous farming families were in a position to earn sums more than double that earned by ordinary labourers as they could rent horses, carts and other equipment to the works schemes.

In addition, many who were undoubtedly deserving of relief but utterly incapable of performing heavy work were also foisted on the relief works administrators, simply because in many areas no alternative form of relief was available, even for the aged and infirm, except in the workhouse. From an early point the British government had been afraid to grant outdoor relief (relief such as food to people in their own homes) even to the infirm because they feared that it would start an expenditure avalanche which could not be contained. Similarly charities such as the Society of Friends were worried about distributing free food lest it should pauperize the population.¹¹⁵ The blind, lame and infirm had therefore no option but to join relief works - regardless of their physical capacity. This situation worsened as the winter progressed and the main breadwinner fell sick. Women and children took their places, forced on to the public works by the pressure of local committees or of individuals such as an active local priest. Lt. Downes who was in charge of works in Co. Waterford complained of his works 'being much retarded by women and children being placed on the works (by the Committees) with spades and shovels, who are quite unfit for such work'.¹¹⁶ More sympathetically, one of those involved in relief work for the Society of Friends wrote

it was melancholy in the extreme to see the women and girls labouring on the public roads. They were employed, not only in digging with the spade and with the pick, but in carrying loads of earth and turf on their backs and wheeling barrows like men, and breaking stones, while the poor neglected children were crouched, in groups, around the bits of lighted turf.¹¹⁷

Faced with such acute pressure from men demanding work the majority of public works overseers simply capitulated and admitted all, regardless of need, to employment. Returns of those on relief works in the autumn and winter of 1846-7 note the number of able-bodied men, infirm men, women and boys as a matter of course. The alternative would have been to refuse those who pressed for employment, as Captain Wynne did, but the result was 'to draw down upon himself and the Board all the odium and vindictive feelings of the poorer classes'.¹¹⁸ Jones, the Board of Works commissioner, had suggested that it would be simpler to disband all local committees, but Trevelyan disagreed.¹¹⁹

The more acute problem which intensified as the winter came concerned wage rates. Trevelyan had attempted to insure in the spring of 1846 that wages paid on public works should be less than standard agricultural wages, but following disagreement among members of the cabinet and the Irish administration the proposal was dropped. His desire was motivated partly by a wish to save money, but also by a fear – which was more than justified – that there would be a heavy exodus of workers from farming to public works. Trevelyan lost his first attempt to control wages; in the autumn of 1846 with the prospect of an even greater influx to the public works the desire to reduce the attraction was even greater. Payment on this occasion was to be by task work and it was envisaged that average wages should be about 2d per day less than the normal wages prevailing in the district.¹²⁰ The introduction of piece work, which was apparently previously uncommon in Ireland, proved very unpopular. Many illiterate and inexperienced labourers could not understand the basis for the calculations, while a threatened reduction in standard public works wages in September 1846 brought near-riots in many areas. The response appears to have been to reduce the stringency of inspection. Most workers appear to have initially earned 8d or 10d per day without much effort, with task work in most cases providing a bonus, so that average earnings of approximately 1/- per day, were common, with some workers earning higher sums.¹²¹

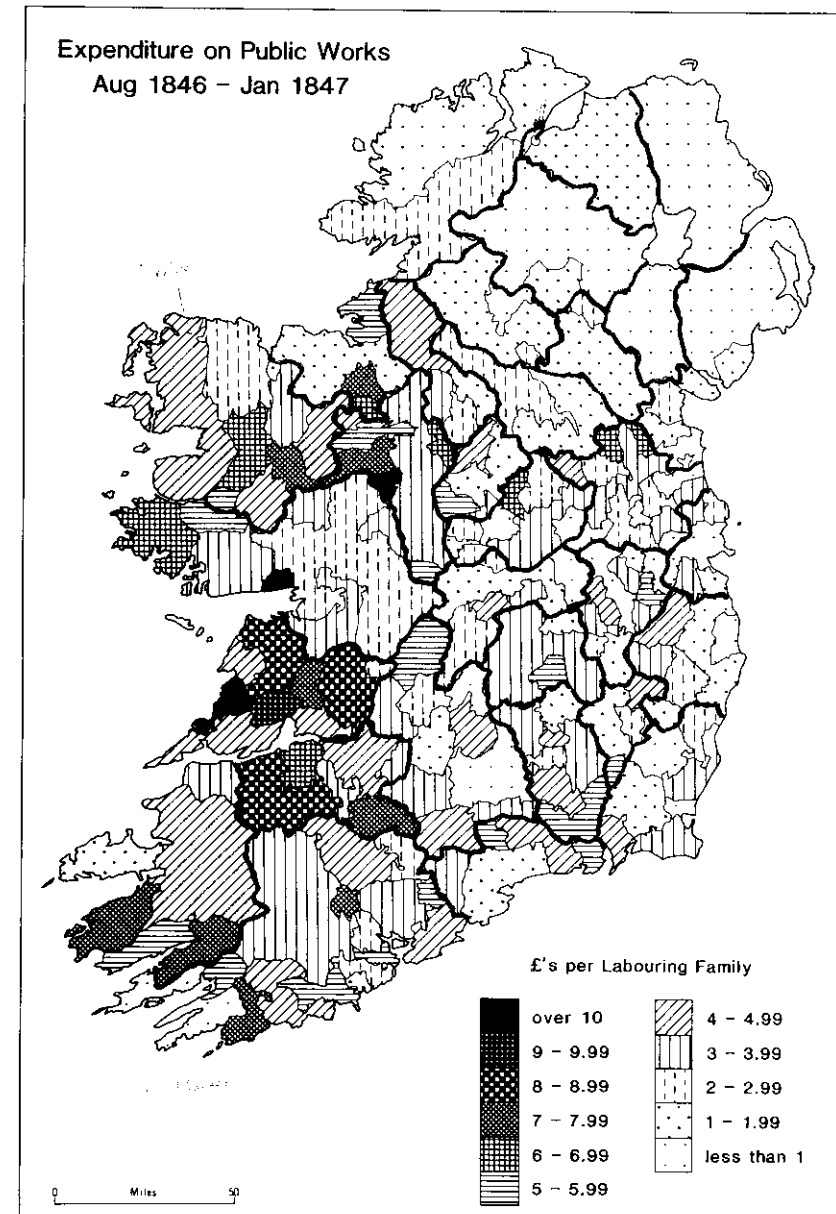
Sharply escalating food prices, (the price of Indian meal approximately doubled between August and January) plus the onset of harsh winter weather – and the winter of 1846-7 was unusually severe – made the economics of survival virtually impossible. Wages which had been adequate to feed a family in August or September could no longer do so by November. One witness from Clare wrote on 6 November that 'the fact is incontestable that the rate of labourers' pay bears no reference whatever to the present price of provisions'. The standard wage of 10d (4p) a day was 'wholly inadequate with meal at 3/- (15p) a stone', which was 'not more than sufficient for an average family for one day'.¹²² Food prices peaked in January, precisely the time when weather conditions were at their worst and men were frequently laid off or sent home early. Jones wrote that Captain Wynne in Clare had reported seeing 'women returning home from Ennis, crying with grief at their inability to purchase; the price being too high for the small sums their husbands or sons had earned upon the works'.¹²³ In turn high food prices reduced food available to relief workers, leaving them malnourished and increasingly incapable of heavy manual work. By January, Captain Wynne was writing from Clare that 'the people

are starving notwithstanding the enormous extent of employment which it is scarcely possible to increase without producing disorder and confusion'.¹²⁴ Another inspector wrote of 'fine gangs of men who three weeks ago could earn 1/2 (6p.) a day, cannot now earn 6d (2½p.) a day at the same work and the same valuation'.¹²⁵

One possible solution would have been higher wages but this would have simply increased the problems facing Irish farming which had already lost a high proportion of its able-bodied workforce in their search for cash wages on the relief works. Farmers and landlords were in most cases unable to match the wages paid on relief works – any increase in such wages would have compounded their difficulties. The Board of Works officials touring the country were fully aware of the neglect of agriculture and could foresee the long-term consequences in totally inadequate food supplies for the coming season. In an effort to provide some cash income for the needy, while ensuring that farming was not wholly neglected, they issued 'Circular 38' on 9 December, a proposal drafted by one of the commissioners, Sir Richard Griffith, that would provide simultaneous employment of labourers by both the Board of Works and local farmers on 'family task work'. Labourers, assisted by their families, were to be assigned the task of building a specified length of drain and it was envisaged that children would help by collecting the necessary stones. Any family who could complete sufficient work for a fortnight's pay in less than that time, e.g. 6 or 8 days, could devote the remaining days to its own farm work. Unfortunately the circular had been prepared without prior consultation with either the British government or the treasury. Whig prime minister, Lord John Russell, expressed himself 'much alarmed' by the proposal and emphasised that 'no Ministry could defend such a proceeding'. Trevelyan wrote immediately demanding its withdrawal.¹²⁶ The Board of Works officials – both in Dublin and in the field – had become increasingly sceptical of the efficacy of their relief programme. Captain Wynne wrote from Clare, 'I can take care that no lives be lost from want of employment; but I cannot undertake to prevent many deaths from want of food'.¹²⁷ By December Jones was writing to Trevelyan noting that 'neither the season of the year nor the state of the poor will permit of their being employed on outdoor work to entitle them to receive a donation' and urging that relief should be given to the aged and infirm in their own cabins by a local authority, and he continued to press this point.¹²⁸ By the end of February another Board of Works commissioner, William Mulvany, was writing to Trevelyan of the 'remarkable coincidence of statements' from Board of Works staff scattered throughout the country.

All emphasised that workers were becoming much weaker and increasingly incapable of performing public works tasks; that farming was totally neglected; supplies of seed were very scarce.¹²⁹ By this stage London had been persuaded of the failure of the public works policy – a conviction brought about by continual reports of conditions in Ireland, but probably even more so by the fact that deaths from starvation – some occurring among men employed on relief works – had been reported. In January 1847 Lord John Russell told the house of commons that the public works scheme was being abandoned and replaced by the hitherto dreaded system of outdoor relief.¹³⁰ Those who had previously worried about the dangers of massive pauperization were no longer concerned, perhaps because mass pauperization had already occurred.

The public works carried out in the autumn and winter of 1846-7 cost the enormous sum of £4,848,235, which it was initially intended would be recouped from the areas which had benefited from the expenditure. The sum amounted to £5.23 for every family in Ireland which the Census Commissioners in 1841 deemed to be dependent entirely on their own labour for subsistence, i.e. those without capital or other resources. As in the spring of 1846 there is no reason to assume that public expenditure was allocated to give the maximum benefit to those in greatest need. Evidence quoted above suggests problems with allocating work in many areas; perhaps of greater interest is the fact that public expenditure did not necessarily go to the areas of greatest need. Map 2 examines the allocation of expenditure on general relief works from August 1846, to January, 1847 – the period of greatest emphasis on public works as a relief measure. The figures exclude expenditure on both land drainage schemes and fishery development, but this should not materially alter the picture as only 5% of total spending went on drainage while fishery expenditure was also insignificant.¹³¹ While the map does indicate that in broad terms spending was higher towards the west of the country and lowest in north-east Ulster, it also indicates considerable discrepancies in spending patterns. As in the spring of 1846 Co. Clare again obtained a much greater sum for public works than any other area, though Co. Limerick was not far behind. While some parts of Galway and Mayo received relatively high sums, other undoubtedly deprived areas, such as Erris, or the Carbery baronies of West Cork, including the much publicised town of Skibbereen, received much lower amounts, lower in fact than a number of undoubtedly more prosperous areas in counties such as Kilkenny. In fact, examining figures on a county basis reveals that Co. Kilkenny spent a marginally greater sum per labouring



family than Co. Roscommon, and approximately one third more than Co. Galway. Prosperous Co. Kildare spent more than Co. Donegal and only marginally less than impoverished Leitrim. The imbalances in spending cannot be adequately explained. Property valuations in the most destitute areas were extremely low. Expenditure on famine relief works was determined by a combination of local lobbying, administrative acumen to propose works and apply for relief, plus belief in the financial ability to pay for it. Lack of active resident gentlemen in itself could account for a lack of applications to the Board of Works, as indeed could an active gentry class who were prepared to provide adequate employment from their own resources. Of the two the former may be the more accurate explanation. One Church of Ireland clergyman writing about conditions in the Skibbereen area, one of the regions whose famine conditions were most publicised, and an area where some of the first deaths from starvation were reported, wrote

In none of the places where I was did the cases appear to be desperate; there is no want of food in any place—delightful consideration—nor want of medicine, but there is a most deplorable want of *available agencies and a consequent want of suitable measures to bring the food and the medicines within reach of the people.*¹³²

The Society of Friends, in its record of its relief operations noted that though distress in Connaught was greater, they had spent proportionately more in Munster because the lack of a community in Connaught made it difficult to organise relief proceedings,¹³³ while Board of Works officials were themselves aware of the financial burden facing the poorer areas. The barony of Burrishoole in Mayo, for example, initially applied for £80,000, a sum which was almost three times the area's rental of £23,388. Officials estimated that to employ the district's labouring families at 1/- per day for 80 days would cost £23,388.¹³⁴

It is easy to condemn the British government's relief programme of the autumn and winter of 1846-7 as a misguided, perhaps even malevolent scheme, the consequence perhaps of undue dedication to restricting government intervention in the market-place, but this is too simplistic. Public works were a tried and trusted remedy for famine times, and they had apparently not been unsuccessful in other years. If the numbers applying for relief had been limited to 50 or 100,000, the system might perhaps have coped. However the sheer enormity of the tragedy was not immediately realised and so the numbers who would flock to relief schemes were underestimated. Three-quarters of a million people, one-third of the able-bodied male population was

simply excessive. The removal of so many workers from the farm labour force inevitably wrought havoc on the economy, just as the failure of the potato crop had done. No section of the economy—wages, food prices, the structure of agricultural production, remained untouched. The major distortion which the potato failure brought to the Irish rural economy had neither been foreseen, nor could it have been readily prevented. In September 1846 when the second potato failure was already known, Irish Chief Secretary, Labouchere, who is generally credited with adopting a reasonably sympathetic approach to Irish famine relief problems wrote to the lord lieutenants of the Irish counties outlining his general approach to relief

The sale of meal or other food in small quantities to persons who have no other means of procuring it, and at the prices of ordinary years, the abstaining from giving higher wages than are paid; or exacting a small quantity of work in return that is required on the works carried out by the Government, the limitation of the works in all cases to the extent to which private employment proved not to be available, these appear to be the chief rules which should be adopted by the Relief Committees for their guidance.¹³⁵

Talk of maintaining wage levels, of doling out food in small quantities, suggests a minor tragedy which would only require marginal alterations to normal practices. It could be argued that in 1846 the total economic basis of rural Ireland had been undermined. Dependence on private employment was utterly foolhardy, both because of the total disruption of price/wage relationships which had taken place, and because it presupposed a greater degree of social responsibility among Irish landowners and larger farmers than in fact existed.

Superficially a more active government food policy would appear to have offered a better solution. However, as already noted, 1846 was a year of general food scarcity and this would have made a repeat of Peel's scheme very difficult, as would the fact that Irish destitution was much greater than in the previous season. Only a free food policy available to almost all comers—such as operated in the summer of 1847—would have met the circumstances of the total potato failure and it can be argued that it took the harsh lessons of the winter of '46 to persuade the British government to take such a step.

Not surprisingly Ireland during the famine years appeared to many to be ripe for social revolution. One of Peel's first responses to news of threatened famine in 1845 was to draft a coercion bill because he felt that food scarcities would inevitably lead to unrest. Kevin B.

Nowlan remarks, that 'In fact, however, the famine years were to prove conspicuous for their tranquility rather than their turbulence'.¹³⁶ This is perhaps something of an overstatement. Agrarian crime rose during 1846, mainly attributable to labourer and farmer unrest as labourers reneged on pledges to pay for conacre land which had yielded only diseased potatoes. Food riots and food thefts during the famine years were of 'an unprecedented character'. Crops such as turnips were lifted from fields, beasts were also stolen, forcing some Cork farmers to sit up at night to guard their crops.¹³⁷ Some attacks on boats carrying grain in the Limerick area were also reported. Many contemporaries felt that a total breakdown of law and order was in prospect. Whig Chief Secretary, Henry Labouchere, saw his primary responsibility

to be to protect the trade in food. There is a good deal of it in the country but it never will be brought freely to market as long as this system of terror prevails.¹³⁸

However, another contemporary observer tended to place the reported food thefts in context, admitting that while there was some plundering of wheat stacks, 'in most such cases the farmer is paid by the party 1/6 per stone for his wheat; thus affording to the farmer a fair remuneration though of course not equal to the market price'.¹³⁹

The relief works provided other outlets for crime. Payment of the workforce in cash brought unprecedentedly large sums of money into remote areas and afforded easy opportunities for many armed robberies. The decision by the Whig administration in the autumn of 1846 to substitute payment by task for a flat payment provoked several gatherings of men who threatened violence if the existing payments system was not maintained. Access to relief employment proved another area which was fraught with tension. This report from Co. Cork is typical of many:

On the 10th instant, a party of about 200 men went to the new road making at Courtmacsherry and demanded employment, which being refused, they obliged all the other men engaged on the work (about 80) to leave it, saying that as they were not employed, they would prevent any others from working on it.¹⁴⁰

Public works officials who failed to give in to such pressures faced threats to their life; several stewards and overseers suffered assassination attempts, notably in the Limerick and Clare areas. The forces of law and order appear to have faced difficulties in dealing with such

threats. There are undoubted undercurrents of terror in the comments of many rural-based observers in the autumn of 1846. One Clare commentator wrote

Every man of rank, and property, person and priest are afraid to do or say anything that may be contrary to the wishes or feelings of the mob, for such the assemblages must be considered to be who crowd into and surround the sessions house.¹⁴¹

Reports of unrest would appear to have dwindled as the winter progressed. In the autumn months workers faced a threat of hunger but were still in a position to be agitated by their conditions; as food prices accelerated and access to food became more difficult, political militancy gave way to a more immediate struggle for survival with most of the depleted energy being devoted to obtaining food. This is a common feature of genuine famine conditions. In Russia in the years 1918-22 it was estimated that searches for food occupied up to 70-95% of famine victims' time. In Leningrad during the German siege of 1941-2 the most obvious characteristic of the starving population was its apathy, a description which is also applied to the population of the Dutch provinces which experienced famine conditions as a result of German retaliation in 1944.¹⁴²

Soup Kitchens

Having become convinced that public works were ineffective in coping with the famine crisis the British administration decided to abandon them, replacing them with food depots which would supply cooked food, mostly soup, free to the destitute population and at a low price to others. Cooked food was favoured rather than uncooked meal for a number of reasons. Evidence from relief workers in rural Ireland had already indicated that many families were apparently incapable of successfully cooking Indian meal, despite instructions. Hunger pangs drove many to eat any food given to them raw, or undercooked, with consequential health problems. Of equal importance was the fact that rural Ireland would seem to have suffered from a turf scarcity during famine years because workers had abandoned the normal routine of the rural calendar either for employment on relief works or to search for food. Cooked food also had the ideological benefit of being virtually immune from pilferage, or financial speculation. Unscrupulous traders could not corner the market in bowls of soup or plates of porridge as it was alleged that they had attempted to do with supplies of meal.

The decision to feed a high proportion of the Irish population without charge and without requiring them to enter the workhouse marked a definite break with the famine relief policies of both Peel and the Whigs, who had always insisted on the necessity of not providing gratuitous relief. It also breached one of the canons of the 1838 Poor Law Act which determined that, unlike the English Poor Law, Irish unions would not grant any outdoor relief. Its acceptance indicates that the British government was not as inflexible as some commentators have suggested. Faced with the evidence from officials throughout rural Ireland of the ineffectiveness of public works and the apparent efficacy of the soup kitchens operated by the Society of Friends, they shifted their position. Unfortunately the establishment of soup kitchens took time and required the formation of yet another administrative apparatus. In the intervening period many people starved. Public works continued in operation, reaching their peak employment level of 734,000 in early March, but, on 20 March, 20% of those employed were discharged and dismissals continued at a steady pace through the following weeks.¹⁴³ Pending the establishment of soup kitchens many destitute families were suddenly thrown on the poor law. This hiatus in famine relief in the early months of 1847, during one of the most difficult periods of all, and one marked by extremely high death-rates, is probably one of the most serious inadequacies in the whole government relief programme. Paradoxically it was a time when public works *might* have proved effective if the population had retained sufficient physical vitality. By the spring of 1847 the international food crisis was over and food imports flowed into Ireland in ever increasing amounts. Food prices reached their peak in January 1847; by March Indian meal which had been over 2d per lb. was now 1.5d; by August it was under 1d, below the price level of the winter of 1845-6.¹⁴⁴ The wages paid on public works would probably have been sufficient to feed a family again by the late spring of 1847 -- if work had been available and men capable of working. In practice relief works were winding down, while the disarray of Irish agriculture meant that farmers had severely curtailed their employment of labour.

Instead it was decided to temporarily implement a system of soup kitchens to be administered by local committees pending an extensive re-organisation of the poor law. A Dublin-based commission was established to oversee the new policy. While the commission could advance loans to speed up operations the ultimate cost of the feeding services was to be placed on the local poor rates. To implement this administrative change new relief committees, organised on the basis

of poor law unions rather than parishes -- as had been the case with committees handling relief works -- had to be established. They generally consisted of local magistrates, poor law guardians, the highest local rate-payers and a clergyman of each persuasion.¹⁴⁵ This again took some time. While the decision to wind up public works was taken in January, food kitchens were not in widespread operation until the late spring and early summer. By 15 May committees had been established in 1,248 of the 2,049 electoral divisions in the country, and a further 600 were established in the following two months. The peak of feeding operations occurred in mid-August when over 3m. people were being fed each day by the state.¹⁴⁶ In all, the relief commissioners advanced over £1.7m. in loans for the running of soup kitchens during the summer of 1847, but these loans were to be repaid in full from local rates. Like public works, soup kitchens relied very heavily on local initiative, with local landowners, clergy, their families or other benevolent citizens being responsible for organising the soup boilers.

Society of Friends

While the soup kitchens were being organised the mass of the rural poor was dependent either on the poor law or on private charity, notably the relief efforts of the Society of Friends. The role of the Society of Friends in Irish famine relief has been justly appreciated by even those most critical of British policy during those years. Charitable organisations, both in Ireland and in Britain, had contributed much in the form of famine relief to Ireland in previous seasons of distress. The threat of famine in the spring of 1846 provoked the re-establishment of the Dublin-based Irish Relief Association, and bodies such as the General Central Relief Committee. Voluntary subscriptions from places as remote as Calcutta were channelled to Ireland in response to reports of distress. In November 1846, a group of Dublin members of the Society of Friends decided to form a Central Relief Committee which would act in conjunction with co-religionists in other parts of the country and with members of the Society based in London.

The small number of Irish Quakers included within its ranks a disproportionately large number of prosperous and capable businessmen such as the Pim family, who were heavily involved in textiles, banking and railways, or the Bewley family with interests in the food trade. They brought to famine relief a dedicated compassion,

combined with a genuine lack of interest in proselytisation and considerable business acumen. They also had the advantage of close links with English, and indeed American co-religionists, similarly philanthropic and prosperous communities which provided access to substantial funds, and in the American case, generous supplies of cheap food. Food shipments from the American Society of Friends provided almost two-thirds of all Quaker relief supplies. Quaker relief efforts were characterised by considerable emphasis on obtaining accurate information about actual conditions: co-religionists living in provincial Ireland were used, as were travelling investigators and reporters, notably the Norfolk Quaker, William Forster, and Yorkshireman James H. Tuke, both of whom toured distressed parts of Ireland during early months of 1847.

The Society's relief efforts relied heavily on the existence of disinterested and capable expertise. Their reports, and the account of James H. Tuke, continually lament the lack of a middle class in many parts of Ireland and their report admits that Connaught got less relief assistance than might have been expected because the middle class to oversee disbursement was lacking. The Quakers sought out 'reliable local agents' who were provided with 'small and frequent grants' for dispersal. Initially grants were only given to supplement local efforts.¹⁴² The Dublin Committee was also characterised by a relatively cautious attitude towards relief, an unwillingness to interfere with the social and economic order, or to criticise the government. At an early stage they decided therefore to concentrate on

those cases for which sufficient provision had not been made by Government or which did not properly come under its care, and which had not been relieved by the operations of other associations.

They were wary of providing food free of charge and determined on a policy of providing free boilers and money grants to local committees to purchase food which would be cooked and sold at a very cheap price, generally in the form of soup. The deteriorating conditions of Ireland in the winter of 1846-47 caused the London Friends' Committee to urge them to adopt a more active, and more extensive policy of relief; in particular the latter body suggested that free supplies of food should be shipped to the most distressed areas. However the Dublin Friends still retained their cautious attitude. They decided that it would not be appropriate to compete with private merchants who should be left as the main market suppliers. Hence they were prepared to ship rice, which was not ordinarily handled by Irish traders, but not grain.

The Friends' soup kitchens were of primary importance in the spring and early summer of 1847. The Society offered to operate soup kitchens throughout all the most distressed unions, pending the establishment of government soup kitchens, provided that the government pay 50% of the cost, but the offer was rejected. In the light of the undoubted physical and emotional exhaustion of most committee members by the end of 1847, one wonders if they would have been capable of carrying out their offer. Once the government soup kitchens were in operation by June 1847 they scaled down their efforts, thinking 'it right to withdraw as far as possible from gratuitous issues of food'.¹⁴⁸ They continued to supply clothing, but concentrated most of their remaining efforts on helping the sick and the elderly, primarily on promoting fishery development, supplying agricultural seed, encouraging flax cultivation and other long-term improvement schemes. Proposals that they should re-establish soup kitchens during the winter of 1847-48 were considered and rejected, so too was Trevelyan's offer of £100 if they would again become active in the summer of 1849. In their report, their reluctance to resume relief activities is justified, not without reason, by the sheer physical exhaustion of committee members. However it also reflects the undoubted conservative ideologies of the Dublin committee. Gratuitous almsgiving was viewed as inherently damaging, in particular because it might interfere with government arrangements to deal with the poor – particularly through the poor law.

It seems obvious both from comments in the Society's records of relief operations, and from the contrasts between the account of the west of Ireland published by English Quaker, James H. Tuke, and the opinions of Jonathan Pim, secretary of the Dublin Committee, that the English representatives tended to be more radical in their proposals, and also more critical of the social structure of Ireland. Thus Tuke in his account provided fundamental criticism of the landlord and tenant system and argued that in the western part of Ireland the poor law system was utterly incapable of tackling the problems which existed, while the report of the Dublin Committee both urged that relief be left to the government, and rejected any proposed reform of land legislation – such as fixity of tenure – as a 'violation of the rights of property'.¹⁴⁹ Without dismissing the value of the Society of Friends activities, it might also be worthwhile placing them in context. They provided almost £200,000 – the majority of this in food provided by American Friends which was shipped across the Atlantic free of charge by the British government. In contrast the British government, through loans and grants for a range of purposes,

including drainage and land improvement during the famine years, spent over £10.5m., while government soup kitchens during the summer of 1847 cost over £1.7m.

Poor Law and Famine Relief

The establishment of an Irish poor law system in the year 1840 was explicitly designed to meet long-term needs of the Irish poor but *not* to deal with a major famine. This remained the initial reaction of the British authorities with the onset of famine in 1845 when the only role apparently envisaged for the workhouses was in the provision of fever hospitals. Thus the famine relief apparatus established by Peel ignored the existence of the poor law, though when Russell re-organised the system in the autumn of 1846 the chairman of each local poor law board was appointed to the local relief committee. The initial impact of famine on the workhouses was slight. By March 1846 when food was becoming scarce there were only 51,000 inmates in Irish workhouses, approximately 50% of capacity.¹⁵⁰ The sharp rise in food prices in the winter of 1846-7 and the obvious inability of public works to cope with distress placed increasing pressure on the poor law system, while the sharp escalation of food prices and the near unavailability of potatoes meant rising feeding costs and necessitated changes in diet. By Christmas 1846, 56 workhouses were overcrowded and within a month there were 108,487 inmates in workhouses which had been built with a total capacity of 100,000. Those in the more distressed areas of the west and south-west faced the most serious pressure. Faced with grave local distress, lack of space and a heavy demand for relief, many poor law boards of guardians, particularly in the Cork area, resorted to providing outdoor relief in the form of food supplies despite the fact that such relief was expressly forbidden by the 1838 act. It would seem that many poor law unions adopted the practice of gratuitous food relief several months before it was officially authorised and introduced by the government in the summer of 1847.¹⁵¹ The example of disobedient boards of guardians may have been as influential in persuading the government to introduce soup kitchens as the better known Quaker precedents. For many families the poor law rather than the Quakers bridged the gap until the establishment of the soup kitchens in the summer of 1847. Certainly workhouse numbers, which remained in excess of 100,000 from January until July 1847, showed a fall during the second half of June, when the soup kitchens were fully operational and continued

to decline until early September, shortly after the cessation of the soup kitchens, when they had reached 75,376.¹⁵²

Soup kitchens had been established in 1847 as a purely temporary provision pending the full-scale reform of Irish poor relief which was implemented in August 1847. Under this measure a separate Irish Poor Law Commission, independent of the English body, was established for the first time, while the existing poor law unions were re-organised and their number increased from 130 to 163. Many of the very large unions in the west of Ireland were sub-divided and new workhouses erected. In marked contrast to the original intention, the poor law was now given primary responsibility for famine relief, through both indoor and outdoor relief. By the autumn of 1847 it would seem, without being unduly cynical, that the novelty of Irish famine was wearing thin and it was increasingly being seen as a permanent rather than a temporary problem. Hence the attraction of a permanent solution. Despite the persistence of famine conditions there was another major potato crop failure in 1848 and a lesser one in 1849 and conditions of unusual distress persisted in Ireland until the early 1850s—there were no further famine relief committees, no public works, no special independent soup kitchens. Even the activities of voluntary agencies such as the Society of Friends had been sharply scaled down. Relief was now available only after recourse to the poor law guardians who would provide assistance, either inside or outside the workhouse. Outdoor relief was normally to be limited to those suffering from old age, long-term illness or disability, or widows with two or more dependent children, though such relief could be extended to other categories if no space could be found in the workhouse. During 1847 and '48 many workhouses erected temporary accommodation, or opened auxiliary premises to meet the pressure of demand and many workhouses were permanently extended to meet what appeared at the time to be a long-term need.

Workhouse inmates included all sections of the population but a disproportionate number were women and children. Many of the women were genuine widows, but others had been abandoned by a husband; some children were orphans, but others had been abandoned by both parents, either temporarily or permanently. In some instances parents left children in the workhouse intending to collect them or send for them from America when economic circumstances permitted. Many remained a long-term burden on the poor law. Already by February 1847 children under fifteen years, though some would have had parents in the workhouse, constituted a majority of all workhouse inmates; they also constituted a majority of inmates in 1851. The poor

law guardians were forbidden to take children without first ascertaining that they had been orphaned, and many women and children gained admission only by making false declarations of orphanacy. In other cases the whole family entered the workhouse but the parents then absconded, leaving their children behind. This was such a major problem at Kanturk workhouse that the surrounding walls were raised to 13 feet to prevent surreptitious exits by abandoning parents, but some still managed to escape.¹⁵³

Numbers in receipt of poor law assistance rose each year until 1849 when they peaked. Dependence on the poor law was further exacerbated by the large-scale failure of the potato crop in the summer of 1848 and by the increasing resort of landlords to eviction. While most of those in need were given outdoor, rather than indoor, relief the balance gradually shifted towards relief in the workhouse as more accommodation became available. As a result of further reforms in 1849 no part of a poor law union was to be more than seven or eight miles from a workhouse, in marked contrast to the position in 1846 when areas such as Erris were more than forty miles from the nearest workhouse.¹⁵⁴ Whereas in the year ending 1847 a total of 417,139 were relieved in the workhouse, this had risen to 610,463 in 1848 and 932,284 in 1849. Numbers receiving outdoor relief, however, peaked at 1,433,042 in 1848, falling to 1,210,482 in the following year. In 1850 they fell even more sharply, and by 1852 outdoor relief was being granted only to a small minority of cases.¹⁵⁵ The increasing reliance on indoor, rather than outdoor, relief also reflected the attitude of poor law guardians, though this varied considerably in different areas. Guardians in Ulster were generally loath to grant outdoor relief and by 1849 it was either totally unknown, or extremely rare in many northern unions. In other areas, however, the increasing reliance on indoor relief reflected the impact of both eviction and the Gregory clause -- so called from Sir William Gregory M.P. for Dublin, whose widow, Lady Augusta Gregory, was subsequently to achieve fame for her role in the Anglo-Irish literary revival. This clause, which was passed in August 1847, denied public relief to all holding more than one-quarter acre of land. In an effort to evade its operations, land-holders engaged in fictitious leasing of land to more affluent friends or relatives; others attempted to evade its imposition by placing their wife and children on poor relief while themselves remaining in occupation of the family holding, a practice prohibited by the poor law.¹⁵⁶ Many were undoubtedly forced to give up their land to gain relief and lost their homes in the process. It is impossible to assess the numbers forced into the workhouse by the Gregory clause.

It probably only worked to intensify an already-strong tendency towards eviction on the part of Irish landlords faced with crippling rates burdens and a mass of destitute tenants who were heavily in arrears. Evictions left many in the workhouse with no alternative home. When Kenmare board of guardians attempted to transfer some of its inmates to outdoor relief they refused because they had nowhere else to go as their homes had been levelled.¹⁵⁷ With overcrowding in workhouses, many who sought admission were turned away. James H. Tuke in his travels in Connaught in the autumn of 1847 wrote of Swineford Union

On 10 November 120 were admitted beyond the regulations and hundreds were refused admission for want of room. Some unhappy beings perished on the high roads and in the fields.¹⁵⁸

Some who were receiving outdoor relief because of lack of space in the workhouse had lost their homes through eviction, and the poor law commissioners noted families in receipt of outdoor relief being forced to part with some of their scanty food allowance in return for accommodation.¹⁵⁹

The placing of the burden of continuing famine relief on the shoulders of the poor law system reflected the long-standing belief of Trevelyan and other authorities that Irish poverty should be the responsibility of Irish property. He felt that it was desirable 'to make the burden as near local as possible in order that it may be locally scrutinised and locally checked'.¹⁶⁰ However, localisation almost invariably meant bankruptcy, or near bankruptcy in many localities. The English Quaker, James H. Tuke, who toured the west of Ireland in 1847, was adamant that whereas in most of Ireland there were sufficient resources for the burden of poverty to be locally borne, this was not the case in Connaught, Donegal, or parts of Kerry, Limerick and Clare.¹⁶¹ Tuke's assessment proved correct. There had been resistance to the poor rate and difficulties in collection in some parts of the west even before the famine. Once famine struck the cost of poor relief escalated, as did the poor rates. By 1847, for example, the guardians of Westport Union were levying a rate of 10/- in the £. In many instances, however, the levy became an almost academic exercise. Small farmers were virtually destitute, rent arrears were mounting, many of the middling and larger farmers who might have been in a position to pay rates resisted paying up. In many instances the high burden of rates induced farmers to sell their stock and emigrate with their families. The problem was exacerbated by the fact that the heaviest burden of poor relief, hence of rates, was in the

poorest unions whose populations were least able to pay. Not surprisingly many unions became technically bankrupt, unable to pay their bills or to repay loans from the Dublin administration while some refused to strike a rate. A total of 33 boards of guardians were dissolved between August 1847 and March 1848 and replaced by vice-guardians who were public servants. The dissolved boards of guardians included virtually every union along the western seaboard south of Sligo and many inland western unions, plus a number of more surprising instances such as Athlone, Granard and Mullingar. In general, however, dissolution coincided with areas of acute distress, suggesting that local circumstances rather than mis-management was responsible for financial difficulties. In many instances the replacement vice-guardians did not prove notably more successful in curbing expenditure.¹⁶²

The poor law was left to handle the continuing distress caused by recurrent famine, cholera and other medical disasters virtually without outside assistance. A re-establishment of public works was mooted early in 1848 but rejected by Trevelyan, though James H. Tuke felt that it might be desirable to at least complete the many road works left unfinished in the spring of 1847.¹⁶³ While still contending with serious distress they were forced to begin the almost impossible task of repaying the government loans granted for relief during 1846 and 1847. By February 1848 all but six unions had struck a rate for the repayment of government loans.¹⁶⁴ Kerry landlord, Sir John Benn-Walsh, recounted a conversation in 1849 with the vice-guardian of his local union, a Mr. Flood.

The picture he draws of the union is frightful. Since last year the debts have increased eightfold (despite having a vice-guardian in control). There are now 22,000 paupers on outdoor relief out of a population by the last census of 78,000 now probably 10,000 less. He estimates that there are not potatoes to feed the people three months even if the crop be good, and the blight has re-appeared in many parts. The vice-guardians have already collected all the produce of the butter in rates and they are prepared to strike another in September to secure the produce of the harvest. The fact is that the landed proprietors are now the mere nominal possessors of the soil. All the surplus produce is levied by the Poor Law Commissioners.

Such heavy impositions, at a time when scarcity was still recurring, increased the regional economic problems and hindered possibilities of recovery. Benn-Walsh lamented in 1849, 'My estate offers the singular spectacle of great prosperity, improvements and progress as

far as the tenants and state of the land is concerned, yet neutralized by all the exactions of the government and of the poor rates'.¹⁶⁵ A poor law inspector from Ballina Union in 1848 reported 'large tracts of land remaining unproductive', because of the 'broken-down state of the majority of landlords' and tenants lacking the resources to stock and cultivate their land.¹⁶⁶

The only relief to over-burdened unions came from the British Relief Association, a charitable organization which used the funds it collected in both Britain and America to meet some of the cost of feeding school children in the distressed unions of the west of Ireland. They assisted in the maintenance of up to 200,000 children in both 1848 and 1849.¹⁶⁷ Those responsible for poor law administration, either in Dublin or in rural areas, were forced to manage a system whose rationale many strongly questioned. The Poor Law Commissioners appointed inspectors to many western unions to oversee administration, report on incompetence and generally improve efficiency. However the inspector appointed to Ballina Union wrote

The question must now be determined whether the experiment of making property support poverty is to be continued in the west of Ireland and I have no doubt whatsoever such an experiment must ultimately fail and I therefore think it would be most cruel to persevere in it.

Appeals to the British treasury for financial assistance for the distressed unions proved unavailing, despite the plea of Twistelton, an Irish Poor Law Commissioner

I want to leave distinctly on record that, from want of sufficient food, many persons in these unions are at present dying or wasting away; and at the same time it is quite possible for this country to prevent the occurrence there of any deaths from starvation by the advance of a few hundred pounds.¹⁶⁸

The only response to these pleas was a decision that a levy of 6d in the £ would be placed on the rates in the more prosperous Irish unions, producing a maximum sum of £100,000 which would be transferred to relieve the distressed unions. The establishment of a separate Irish Poor Law Commission had probably made it impossible to consider extending the levy to British unions. In fact, many of the more prosperous Irish unions, especially those in Ulster, strongly objected to the charge.¹⁶⁹ The extreme localisation of the poor rates burdened led to acute pressure on the part of ratepayers to divest themselves of as much of the burden as possible. Erris was established as a separate

union, partly because of the need for workhouse accommodation closer to an area of acute distress than the Ballina workhouse, which was forty miles distant, but the reform did have the advantage of relieving Ballina ratepayers of the burden of maintaining one of the most deprived areas in Ireland. With the re-organization of poor law units in 1849 there was considerable manoeuvring on the part of landlords to ensure that their estate was not linked for rating purposes with an area containing a large destitute population. Benn-Walsh reported meeting a Limerick merchant who had within the past two or three years purchased a 'considerable estate' which was now being formed by those determining poor law boundaries 'into an electoral division to itself' which would mean that the landlord would have his poor rates burden 'within his control' as he would only be responsible for maintaining paupers from his own estate. Benn-Walsh himself made a point of going with his agent to meet those determining poor law boundaries in his area and he reported with apparent relief that under the new arrangements his estates 'would be thrown with better partners than at present'¹⁷⁰ presumably reducing his long-term burden.

Famine Deaths

For most people the Irish famine is synonymous with massive mortality. Estimates of the numbers who died have varied widely in the range from 500,000 to one million people. The mortality statistics of the 1851 census, which suggest almost one million deaths in total, including 'normal' and famine deaths for the years 1846-51, are undoubtedly an underestimate as they rely on the recollections of survivors to record family deaths. This process is rather hazardous in normal circumstances; given the disruption of the famine years, when whole families died out and others emigrated, it is undoubtedly seriously defective. Estimates for excess deaths during the famine years must take as their starting point the 1841 population, that of 1851, and an assumed 'normal' death rate. Those who have otherwise 'disappeared' can be deemed to be famine victims, or to have emigrated. The range of possible deaths can therefore vary, depending on whether one assumes famine emigration statistics to be accurate, or not. Low emigration estimates give rise to a high death rate; higher emigration estimates to a correspondingly lower figure for deaths. Neither death nor emigration figures can be derived without certain fundamental assumptions. Recent work by Mokyr, which broadly

accepts the accuracy of famine emigration figures—with some adjustments—estimates that at least one million extra deaths occurred during the famine years. Boyle and O Grada, in a separate, and as yet unpublished, analysis calculate that during the famine years the Irish death-rate doubled.¹⁷¹

A regional analysis of famine mortality conducted by Mokyr reveals an uneven incidence. The excess death rate was least in east Leinster, the Dublin area and north-east Ulster. Medium excess death rates occurred in the remainder of Leinster, central Ulster such as Tyrone and Armagh, and in Co. Tipperary, while high excess mortality was registered in most of Munster and south Ulster. The highest death rates occurred in Connaught, particularly in Sligo and Galway, with Mayo undoubtedly the most affected county of all. Mokyr claimed that there was no obvious link between excess mortality and degree of dependence on the potato, perhaps because 'the dependency on potatoes before the famine was so extensive and the destruction of the crops in 1846 so complete that variations in the potato acreage per capita or per acre hardly mattered'.¹⁷² This hypothesis is confirmed by a cursory analysis of the 1848 potato failure which had its greatest impact in the northern midlands, in counties Cavan, Longford, Meath, Monaghan, Dublin, Westmeath and Kildare. Distress however was undoubtedly still concentrated in the west and south-west of Ireland, areas where potato yields in 1848 were above-average, though there was apparently some increasing mortality in the eastern and north midland counties.¹⁷³ Income levels, literacy and size of farm emerge from Mokyr's analysis as providing a more accurate indicator of ability to survive the famine. Those with holdings of less than twenty acres proved extremely vulnerable, those with larger farms showed a reasonable possibility of survival. Urbanised areas did not necessarily fare better than rural areas, perhaps because the flight of the destitute and starving to the towns brought infections and overstretched sanitary, food and medical resources in what was at the time a generally unhealthy environment. Urban mortality figures are also somewhat complicated by the cholera epidemic of 1849 which was most severe in the major towns and which must be regarded as a disaster which was independent of the famine.

Mokyr's analysis does not consider the impact of government relief policy on mortality levels. This is among the topics considered in a number of articles by Cousens. While Cousens's estimates of famine mortality have become somewhat discredited, this does not necessarily mean that his analysis should be totally dismissed. In common with Mokyr he emphasises the close link between poverty and high

mortality. He also tends to attribute the high death rate of the western areas to the break-down of the poor law system and its inability to cope with the crisis, while arguing that the high level of evictions in counties such as Clare, Tipperary and Roscommon contributed to deaths being higher than might otherwise have been expected.¹⁷⁴

The analysis of Boyle and O Grada concentrates on the age and sex composition of those who died. Their results reveal that famine deaths were heaviest among the young, especially those under five years, and the old, those over sixty. Excess deaths were much lighter among those aged between ten and sixty. As in the case of Mokyř, Boyle and O Grada's work is dependent upon assumptions about emigration: if more children and elderly people emigrated than the figures suggest the number of young and old who died would be correspondingly reduced. However the Boyle and O Grada pattern of heavy mortality among both young and old is almost identical to that which prevailed in 'normal' pre-famine circumstances, something which reinforces their case. The general impression is that the famine doubled the death-rate for virtually all age groups.¹⁷⁵ It would also seem plausible to suppose that the old and young had the greatest difficulties gaining access to food or relief; they were the least capable of earning their living and were least mobile in the search for food. The rector of Schull in west Cork wrote about 'the aged, who with the young are almost without exception swollen and ripening for the grave'.¹⁷⁶ The young had the least resistance to dysentery or infectious diseases, while typhus, which was extremely prevalent during the famine years, caused many deaths among the elderly because it affected the heart. If correct, the age-specific impact of the Irish famine as outlined by Boyle and O Grada is quite similar to that of the Indian famine of 1943 which killed 'by magnifying the forces of death normally present in the pre-famine period'.¹⁷⁷ Their results also suggest that, whereas in pre-famine Ireland, and indeed in post famine rural Ireland until the 1930s, women had a higher mortality level than men, that trend was altered during the famine years with men at slightly greater risk of dying. This greater vulnerability may be due to the pressure of relief works, particularly for bodies deprived of food, or may simply reflect the fact that men have higher calorie requirements than women and thus faced greater difficulties in coping with scarcity. There is a suggestion in McArthur's account of the reports of the Irish commissioners of health that in most serious Irish fever epidemics men constituted the majority of cases, and presumably of fatalities.¹⁷⁸ The greater vulnerability of men to famine conditions has been recorded in other famines. During the famine in West

Holland in 1944 male mortality rose by 16%, female by 7%, while during the siege of Leningrad in the second world war female mortality increased by less than that of men and peaked three or four months later.¹⁷⁹

The onset of famine deaths lags behind food scarcity. In the Bengal famine of 1943 more than half the deaths attributable to that famine took place after the year 1943.¹⁸⁰ While the year 1846 was marked by an increase in the admission rate to Dublin fever hospitals, the death-rate during that year does not appear to have occasioned any special concern, and the commissioners of health appointed by the lord lieutenant under the Temporary Fever Act in March 1846, in the expectation of an emergency, were disbanded in August.¹⁸¹ Cousens, the only writer to date to attempt an analysis of the chronology of Irish famine mortality, suggests a peak in deaths in the spring of 1847, which he attributes to the failure of the relief works programme. This is confirmed by a wide range of contemporary evidence. Reports of fever from various areas led to the re-establishment of the board of health in February 1847.¹⁸² In the catholic parish of Kilmore, in west Cork, deaths in the period September 1846-January 1847 totalled 236; deaths in February 1847 alone reached 211, peaking in March at 411. Deaths in April, though high, showed a definite decline, as did those in May, and by June figures were below those in February. Cousens suggests that the improvement was attributable to the effectiveness of the soup-kitchen scheme, yet in Kilmore the first soup kitchen was not established until May, by which time deaths were already declining.¹⁸³ In Dublin the worst of the famine deaths had apparently taken place by February 1848 though matters are somewhat complicated by the onset of cholera towards the end of that year, while Belfast dated the end of its epidemics to September 1848.¹⁸⁴ Elsewhere conditions remained acute, and Cousens has identified a second mortality peak in the year 1849 which was attributable to the second potato failure.¹⁸⁵ The health commissioners were not disbanded until August 1850 which may be taken as marking the formal end of the mortality crisis, though the heavy deaths of the later years tended to be concentrated in the west and south-west, areas characterised by a heavy poor law burden and evictions.¹⁸⁶

One of the demographic impacts of the famine which has hitherto tended to be ignored is the dramatic fall in the birth rate. On the basis of an examination of parish registers, Boyle and O Grada tentatively suggest that the average number of baptisms during the famine period was just under 70% of the number during the early 1840s; allowing for the falling population this suggests a birth-rate

which was 80% of the pre-famine level.¹⁸⁷ The decline in births was unlikely to have been uniform throughout the country. A map presented by Cousens based on an analysis of baptismal registers for the year 1847 reveals declines ranging from over 70% in parts of Kerry to less than 20% in the more easterly counties. The timing of this decline is not certain. In the Schull area 1846 was a peak year for baptisms, though by October in that year they had already dropped sharply in the more prosperous Charleville parish.¹⁸⁸ In the following year, however, baptisms in Kilmore parish in West Cork fell by 85% and they fell by 60% in two adjoining parishes.¹⁸⁹ The decline reflected both a sharp drop in the marriage rate and a drop in fertility of married women. Marriages declined due to a lack of surplus income for non-essential purposes and growing apathy towards all activities which were not essential to survival. Evidence from other famines shows an undoubted decline in fertility, though the fertility decline lags behind the decline in food supplies. During the severe wartime famine in Leningrad there was almost total infertility, while in the Dutch famine of 1944 births at the peak of the famine fell to one-third of the expected level, with the impact of infertility being greatest on the poor. Famine would also have resulted in lower average weight of babies born, with consequentially higher deaths and probably some increase in congenital abnormalities, particularly spina bifida. However, follow-up studies of those born during the Dutch famine suggest that those surviving the early months of life suffered no long-term impact.¹⁹⁰

Irish famine victims died from a variety of causes. Only a small minority of deaths can be directly attributed to starvation. The 1851 census returns of those dying in the previous ten years recorded 20,402 deaths from starvation and 22,384 from 'dropsy' - which was undoubtedly hunger oedema - the swelling of organs as a result of acute starvation. Cousens argues that this probably underestimates the number of deaths from starvation. Those dying of fever often died in institutions; people starved to death alone, but even if the true figure is double or treble that recorded, deaths from starvation remain the exception rather than the norm in famine mortality. Deaths from starvation and oedema were undoubtedly concentrated in the most deprived localities. The rector of Schull - an area of acute distress - wrote of local victims 'swollen and ripening for the grave'. The other ailment which can be directly attributed to dietary deprivation is scurvy, which is caused by an insufficient supply of vitamin C. This disease was almost unknown in pre-famine Ireland due to the high consumption of potatoes. Already by the summer of 1846 the

condition was very common in Mayo and Galway, beginning first with ulcerated mouths, developing later in fatal haemorrhages. The dispensary doctor in Ballygar, Co. Galway, recorded it as the first medical consequences of the potato failure.¹⁹¹

The overwhelming majority of famine deaths, however, occurred from typhus, relapsing fevers and dysentery. The relationship between food deprivation and fever is rather imperfect. Victims of anorexia, for example, are not at increased risk from fevers. There were no widespread fever epidemics in Germany in 1945-6 despite serious under-nourishment, while the Netherlands also escaped epidemics during its famine of 1944-5.¹⁹² Dysentery, though an infectious disease, bears some relationship to food deprivation, as unsuitable food and inadequate diet can make people more liable to infection. Many Irish famine accounts describe victims eating maize which was inadequately cooked - it required pre-soaking and long boiling before consumption; or eating raw turnips or other available sustenance. Some doctors attributed dysentery to the eating of seaweed, shellfish or incorrectly cooked Indian meal.¹⁹²

Typhus and relapsing fever, however, are both carried by lice and bear no direct relationship to starvation. This is confirmed by the fact that typhus in particular was responsible for the deaths of many doctors, clergymen and others in presumably comfortable circumstances during the famine years. Typhus, relapsing fever, and dysentery owe much, however, to dirt. Elizabeth Smith in a characteristically censorious comment attributes the spread of dysentery to 'dirty habits, dung-heaps at door, stagnant pools', and more sympathetically 'the inability to buy soap this year'.¹⁹³ One Kilkenny doctor wrote of the famine which 'reduced the physical and moral energies of our people to the lowest standards, engendering unwonted habits of filth and vagrancy, which scattered in all directions the seeds of disease which drove people to the towns leading to overcrowded lodgings and accumulated filth'.¹⁹⁴ Typhus was apparently endemic in Ireland. During the famine years its incidence spread because of greater filth and overcrowding. Surplus clothing and bedclothes were invariably disposed of to raise some food. Rev. N. McEvoy, parish priest of Kells, Co. Meath, wrote of

our famishing countrymen who during the late spring and present summer have pawned for food to prolong existence their last wretched rag of daily as well as of nightly clothing: thanks to God, many and many an Irish pastor is now sleeping upon a bed 'no longer his own' through his sympathies for his suffering flock.¹⁹⁵

Virtually all accounts of famine victims speak of their rags. The Society of Friends devoted much effort to providing supplies of clothing to remedy these needs. However, even when spare clothing was available, shortages of soap, lack of energy to draw extra water, plus the lethargy resulting from lack of food meant that cleanliness suffered. This is common in many famine situations. Accounts of the Russian famine of 1922 mention indifference to personal cleanliness. Lice were extremely common in Auschwitz concentration camp as a result of chronic overcrowding and lack of water.¹⁹⁶ Irish conditions were undoubtedly aggravated by a shortage of fuel. The wet weather of 1846 made turf harvesting difficult, while the diversion of workers to relief schemes coupled, probably, with the lack of energy for taxing work meant that many simply did not bother to save fuel. Scarcity of turf increased the tendency for the poor to huddle together which facilitated the spread of lice. The movement of population from one area to another, the congregation of people, on relief works and at soup kitchens, plus the chronic overcrowding in workhouses, hospitals and emigrant ships all facilitated the spread of fevers. Areas previously immune were infected by the arrival of strangers; beggars frequently spread the disease in other instances. The disease was brought to the east by the shift of population in search of food and work. In this respect remoteness of location was a positive advantage. The islands of Inishbofin and Inishark off the Mayo coast, despite suffering from potato failure and a shortage of fish, remained free from fever until the summer of 1848.¹⁹⁷

Prevention of these epidemics was virtually impossible, given that they were inextricably bound up with the total disruption of food supplies, work practices and lifestyles. The precise cause of fever and the mode of transmission of disease were not properly understood, and this undoubtedly hindered efforts at prevention. To exhort people to pay greater attention to personal hygiene when they lacked food would have been ineffectual, while the best efforts at hygiene by workhouses and fever hospitals crumbled in the face of chronic overcrowding and a desperate shortage of money and manpower, which often led to the death or severe illness from fever of those in charge. One answer was to prevent overcrowding by refusing admission. Thus the Dublin fever hospitals rejected more than half of those who applied for admission in the summer of 1847,¹⁹⁸ but such a regime only resulted in the sick dying on the roadside. Extra fever beds were provided, often in auxiliary sheds erected in the grounds of the workhouse, but many lacked bedding and soon became overcrowded in turn.

Mortality was heaviest from typhus, a disease which apparently was particularly severe on more prosperous people. One in thirteen

of the 473 medical officers appointed to special fever duty died during the famine, many from typhus. Their high mortality, and that of magistrates, clergy and others in comfortable circumstances, is partly attributed to their often being middle-aged or elderly. Typhus damaged the heart and affected the elderly more severely; children escaped relatively lightly. While many of the poor had acquired partial immunity to the disease from earlier infections, this was less likely among the middle and upper classes. Children on the other hand were more likely to have died from dysentery. Many children, particularly those in workhouses, suffered from ophthalmia, an eye infection which spread rapidly in dirty overcrowded conditions. In the years 1849 and 1850 a total of 41,000 cases occurred in Irish workhouses, the vast majority among children, and over 1,000 lost their sight totally or partially in the process.

Emigration

Excess deaths accounted for only approximately half of the population losses incurred during the 1840s. Many who did not die emigrated. Emigration to North America rose somewhat in 1845, more sharply in 1846 and doubled in 1847. Its peak however was in the years 1851 and 1852; thereafter it fell back considerably. Figures for emigration to Britain are less reliable. The British Census of 1841 records 419,256 Irish-born living in that country; by 1851 it had risen to 733,866 and the Irish constituted 3½% of the total population, their highest level ever. Mokyr estimates that there were approximately 420,000 emigrants during the decade 1841-51, the majority presumably during the famine years.¹⁹⁹

Traditional accounts of emigration have regarded the famine as marking a major break with both earlier attitudes and patterns. Oliver McDonagh states that 'the blight had totally reversed the peasant's attitude to emigration' and rejects the opinion that 'it was no more than the pre-famine exodus writ large'. He sees the famine emigration as containing a large 'element of hysteria', 'something which was more a headlong scrambling from a stricken area, more a flight of refugees, than an emigration as ordinarily understood'. He sees peasantry faced with want and misery, left 'in an unstable condition, ready to be swept by some mass sentiment', and provides an account of the famine exodus which suggests that it was highly irrational.²⁰⁰ There is undoubtedly some degree of truth in this account. The famine years brought autumn and winter emigration for the first time—

something which undoubtedly worsened travel conditions. Some embarked without any supplies for the journey. However, given existing conditions in Ireland, it could be argued that emigration was among the most rational responses. This is particularly so of the numbers of strong farmers, men of 20 acres or more, and businessmen, such as bacon merchants, who were apparently well represented among the emigrants of 1847. They had not left during the first potato failure. However, faced with continuing famine which meant an almost total collapse of trade for many businessmen dependent on the rural market, and the prospect of crippling taxes on all save the smallest landholders, many preferred to liquidate their capital, selling livestock and crops and taking their families with them to America. For many the alternative was using the same assets to pay rent arrears or taxes in Ireland. The emigration of these solid farmers with their families aroused considerable consternation among contemporary observers. It would seem that their number has been exaggerated. O Grada has discovered that over 60% of emigrants to New York during the years 1847-8 were servants or labourers, a figure almost identical to their proportion in the previous decade, though McDonagh sees the year 1849 as marking the peak of prosperous emigration.²⁰¹

Nor can the emigration of the poor be dismissed as an irrational move either. The hazards and uncertainties of an Atlantic crossing undoubtedly seemed preferable to the options open in Ireland of unemployment, life in the workhouse, at worst death. For many the only deterrent was the lack of funds. Some Irish landlords, such as Monteagle, lobbied the government in 1846 to embark on a programme of assisted-emigration as part of their famine relief package, but, as in the past, the idea was dropped largely because of fears of the costs involved and the need to assume responsibility for settling emigrants in their new homes. The only state assistance to emigration during famine years involved the shipping of 4,000 female orphans from Irish workhouses to compensate for a scarcity of women in Australia. Landlord initiative was more active and approximately 22,000 emigrants (only about 5% of the total number) had their emigrant fares paid by landlords who realised that this provided the most humane and efficient way of ridding their estates of paupers and in the process reducing their poor rates. Such initiatives were patchy, but very significant on estates where they were adopted, such as the Gore-Booth estate at Sligo.²⁰² For Kerry landlord, Sir John Benn-Walsh, assisted emigration became an integral part of his policy of estate re-organization. Tenants in arrears, cottiers, those holding small patches of land in rundale or partnership holdings, were

induced to give up their land and emigrate; the resulting holdings were consolidated and used to increase the land-holding of efficient tenants or to create new larger farms.²⁰³ By 1849 or 1850 such measures had become increasingly attractive to landowners in the west and south-west, areas which bore the heaviest poor-rates, when a once-off emigration charge was compared with long-term maintenance in the workhouse. In the year 1851 Lord Lansdowne spent £14,000 on emigrant fares for all the paupers who were charged to his estate.²⁰⁴ Landlord initiative caused some boards of guardians to follow suit. They were permitted to borrow on the rates to finance emigration passages and thousands of workhouse residents emigrated to British colonies from 1849.²⁰⁵

Only a small minority of famine emigrants were assisted in this manner. The majority were forced to find the necessary amount to pay for their passage, or they depended on remittances from earlier emigrants to pay their way. Price was therefore a critical consideration for most emigrants, and they sought the cheapest possible means of crossing the Atlantic. Emigrants often walked across Ireland to Dublin or east-coast ports where they embarked for Liverpool, the city which offered the cheapest fares, rather than set sail from an Irish port. It was cheaper to travel to Canada than to the United States because Canadian vessels were subject to less regulation, so Canada became the most common destination. Once arrived those who were in fit condition walked across the border into the United States.

No account of famine emigration would be complete without reference to coffin ships. The death-rate on some ships was more than fifty per cent. Mortality was often higher among newly-arrived emigrants than at sea. Among emigrants to Canada in 1847 over 5% died at sea; 3.46% in quarantine on Grosse Isle and over 8% in Canadian hospitals.²⁰⁶ Deaths resulted from a variety of factors: some were due to unsuitable ships crossing the Atlantic, often in mid-winter in an effort to cash in on the heavy demand for emigrant passages. The majority, however, were not caused by shipwreck, but by outbreaks of fever—generally ship fever on board. Many accounts emphasize the lack of food, the severe overcrowding and the insanitary conditions on board, but, as McDonagh shows, mortality in several instances was worse on some well-equipped and supervised vessels than on inadequate ships.²⁰⁷

Many of those emigrating during the famine times were the truly destitute. Those assisted to leave by landlords, for example, were generally the poorest and those least capable of managing a farm. They were therefore thoroughly ill-equipped in all senses to cope with

emigrant travel. Dirt and lack of sanitation, which posed major health problems on land during the famine years, were even more intractable at sea. Emigrants often travelled without adequate clothing; what they had was already ragged and dirty. Hygiene standards were low and more difficult to maintain in crowded ships where water and washing facilities were scarce. Cheap passages often provided little in the way of food and many famine emigrants lacked the funds to bring their own. In fact, as on land, dirt appears to have been the major liability. Ship fever, like typhus and relapsing fever, was borne by lice. Mortality was apparently heaviest on ships embarking from large ports such as Liverpool. Many emigrants spent days or weeks before travelling in overcrowded lodging-houses and were already incubating fevers when they embarked. In the confined quarters they infected most of the passengers during the journey. While preventing such catastrophes might have been possible, it would have proved extremely difficult. The horrors of famine crossings, particularly in 1847, gave rise to tighter legislation controlling emigrant ships in the future, but requirements that there be a ship's doctor on board would have proved relatively useless when faced with the mass of lice-bearing, fever-ridden passengers which constituted an all too large number of Irish famine emigrants. Emigrant ships, no less crowded, arrived from other European countries during these years, but with comparatively insignificant death-rates, because other emigrants had not suffered the degree of destitution or exposure to fevers which characterised the Irish.

While the emigration of the famine years undoubtedly brought new peaks to the earlier trend and gave rise to unprecedented horrors, it would now seem that famine emigration should be seen not as marking a dramatic break with earlier trends, but as constituting considerable continuity. Emigration was already rising rapidly in the years before the famine and Cormac O Grada's analysis of emigrants reaching New York during 1847-48 leads him to conclude that they differed 'less markedly from those who preceded them in the late 1830s and early 1840s than might be expected'. Famine deaths occurred disproportionately among the young and the old; the majority of those emigrating were young adults, though more emigrants were aged either under fifteen or over thirty-five than in the past, and while Ulster still accounted for the lion's share, 40.6% in 1847-8 compared with 36.7% in the years 1835-46, the proportion from Connaught almost doubled from 12.9% to 24.2%.²⁰⁸ The heaviest levels of emigration during the 1840s occurred from the north midlands and the north-west, from counties such as Mayo, Roscommon, Sligo, Leitrim, Longford, Cavan

and Monaghan. High, though lesser, emigration took place from Galway, Clare, Tipperary and more southerly midland counties. This pattern suggests a shift to the south and the west of the traditionally strong Ulster emigration which was already well established in counties such as Sligo before 1841 and also tends to confirm continuity in patterns rather than a break.

Evictions

One of the least attractive aspects of the famine years is the comparatively high level of evictions which took place, a process which undoubtedly intensified human misery. The decades prior to the famine were characterised by the attempted restructuring of estates in an effort to consolidate farms and reduce the pressure of population. However, the full vigour of consolidation was apparently thwarted by the threat of agrarian violence and perhaps by landlord indifference. The famine intensified the pressures in favour of restructuring. The sharp rise in the cost of labour led to a decided increase in cattle numbers and a reduction in tillage acreage which was not to be reversed. The repeal of the corn laws in 1846 may have been read by many large farmers as marking increased uncertainty in grain markets. Of more importance, perhaps, famine deaths and emigration gave more breathing space on many estates. For the first time in perhaps a century landlords were faced with vacant holdings and the possibility of some restructuring. In many instances, however, deaths and emigration did not give sufficient breathing space, while the famine intensified the pressure on landlords to reduce their tenant population by forcible means. The famine marked an undoubted crisis for many landlords. By 1843 an estimated one thousand estates, accounting for a rental of over £700,000, one-twentieth of the rental of the country, were in the hands of receivers. This figure increased to £1,300,000 by 1847 and £2m. by 1849.²⁰⁹ Rent arrears during the early famine period do not seem to have been excessively high; Elizabeth Smith reported a high level of receipts during 1846,²¹⁰ but continuing famine undoubtedly led to steadily growing arrears, particularly among the hard-hit small farmers. For larger farmers and landlords the greatest burden came from taxation. The decision to charge the cost of most famine relief schemes to local taxes meant that all middling and large farmers, those with holdings valued in excess of £8, were faced with crippling levels of taxation. In the case of smaller holdings the cost was borne by the landlord.

This left landlords whose estates contained a substantial number of smallholdings with a double incentive to remove such tenants. Small tenants were probably the least likely to pay their rent and the most likely to become dependent on famine relief, while eviction combined with consolidation, by reducing the number of small farms, could ease the landlords' tax burden. The problems faced by surviving middlemen were probably greater than those facing landlords. The decades prior to the famine posed difficulties for some of this class,²¹¹ difficulties much increased during the famine years. Much middlemen property was sub-let in very small holdings to the class of tenant least likely to cope with the failure of the potato crop. Whatever sympathy landlords may have shown to tenants in arrears did not extend to middlemen, and their financial difficulties proved an ideal opportunity for some landlords to end their lease.

While eviction statistics prior to 1849 pose certain difficulties, it would appear that in the early years of the famine they remained low. There were 4,599 actions brought for ejectment (excluding those relating to city properties) in the year 1846. We do not know how many of these were successful, but the success rate in subsequent years was 75-80% and this suggests a probable ejectment figure in the region of 3,500-3,600 families. In subsequent years the level rose; to 6,026 in 1847; 9,657 in 1848. In 1849 a total of 16,686 families were evicted; this peaked at 19,949 in 1850 and declined to 13,197 in 1851, falling sharply during the remainder of the 1850s.²¹² These figures marked the peak of Irish evictions, but even in 1850 they constitute only 2.5% of the total number of agricultural holdings.

The impact of these evictions was probably magnified by their localisation. The years 1846-8 were marked by relatively heavy eviction levels in the Ulster counties of Armagh, Antrim and Monaghan. Cos. Leitrim and Tipperary also experienced relatively high levels with Leitrim suffering the highest rate in the country. In 1849 and 1850 evictions, while rising, became more localised, with Munster, notably Tipperary, Clare and Limerick, accounting for over 43% of the national total in both years. The proportion of evictions in Connaught also rose somewhat, that in the other provinces declined. While Co. Clare was severely hit by the famine there is no evidence of disproportionately severe impact in Co. Tipperary, the county which accounts for the highest relative level of evictions throughout these years.

The relationship between famine distress and eviction levels is therefore by no means a simple one. The heaviest burden of famine relief on local taxation fell on the counties of the west of Ireland, such

as Mayo and Galway. While these areas were by no means immune from eviction the volume was considerably less than in other areas. Nor do evictions appear to have been directly motivated by landlord indebtedness or insolvency. While Co. Tipperary, the county with the highest level of famine evictions, recorded a high level of indebtedness among its landlords prior to the famine, so too did Co. Cavan, which does not feature prominently in the famine eviction statistics. Co. Clare, which does, in contrast recorded a relatively low level of pre-famine landlord indebtedness.²¹³ The absence of an easy relationship between rent arrears and evictions is further confirmed by government statistics which record that in the years 1846, 1848 and the early months of 1849 the majority of ejectment orders were described as due to 'Overholding on the title' - tenants remaining in possession after expiry of a lease rather than to non-payment of rent, though the latter cause accounted for the majority of ejectment orders in the year 1847. 'Overholding', however, suggests landlords motivated to evict in order to consolidate holdings rather than merely pressurised by the burden of insolvent tenantry. Both economists and government inquiries had been urging the need for a more streamlined Irish farming structure in the immediate pre-famine decades. The famine disaster apparently confirmed the merits of their arguments, while increasing financial difficulties may have reduced landlord reluctance to evict. The famine also increased the financial difficulties and reduced the solvency of many surviving middlemen and there is little doubt that many eviction orders were initially directed against this body of men. In these circumstances sub-tenants were also generally removed. Many of the evictions in the notorious Kilrush Union involved such middlemen, and the casualties were large numbers of sub-tenants, the majority holdings less than five acres, some only in possession of a cabin and no land.²¹⁴ Many landlords justified such evictions on the grounds that the people in question were not their legal tenants.²¹⁵ In addition, as Beames argues, the famine was marked by a serious erosion of the strength of the agrarian secret societies and this permitted widespread eviction free from the threat of retaliatory action.²¹⁶ It may be no coincidence that counties of record eviction levels, such as Tipperary, Limerick, Clare and Leitrim, were among the areas of heavy pre-famine agrarian crime, suggesting that an earlier restructuring process had been hampered by the strength of secret societies. Once these were apparently weakened during the famine, landlords embarked on a series of evictions which had been previously thwarted. Restructuring was apparently a relatively slow process. All counties with above average eviction rates

displayed a sharp decline in the number of agricultural holdings. While the total number of holdings in the country as a whole fell by almost 20% between 1847 and 1850, the decline in Clare was double that level and both Tipperary and Limerick reported declines of almost 30%; in all of these counties, however, the increase in cattle numbers was below the national average.

The evictions of the famine years intensified the hardship which many families had suffered because of lack of food and exposure to disease. Cousens argues, probably with some validity, that they were responsible for increasing the death rate in some counties.²¹⁷ Evictions imposed a heavy burden on the poor law system, notably in Co. Clare where the evictions of Kilrush Union were the subject of special government inquiry.²¹⁸ It can be argued that, peaking in the years 1849-51, when the worst of the famine had passed, they prolonged suffering and distress. They also played a major role in bringing about a restructuring of the Irish agriculture scene. While much of the reduction in smallholdings was brought about by famine deaths and emigration, evictions added a measure of compulsion to be resorted to by landlords who felt that natural wastage had not been sufficient.

The evictions of the famine years have been frequently presented as the norm in Irish landlord-tenant relations and as such they provided potent ammunition for those arguing the injustice of landlord rule. In fact they are the exception rather than the rule. Both pre-famine and post-famine evictions levels appear to have been relatively low. It would appear that the prolonged pressure of the famine years broke the normal landlord reluctance to evict and that the cumulative horrors of the preceding years numbed landlord sensitivity to the suffering which they were causing. The official reaction varied. Local poor law officials faced with the human consequences of eviction in the form of workhouses overcrowded with destitute people were naturally critical. Some at Westminster viewed evictions as a necessary preliminary to the introduction of modern scientific farming in Ireland, but in general the government regarded such measures with disfavour even in cases where the estates were hopelessly encumbered. While they favoured consolidation they preferred to see it emerge through voluntary emigration of surplus tenantry.²¹⁹ However, it should perhaps be remembered that while tens of thousands of families were evicted, many hundreds of thousands remained undisturbed, many of them surviving on small uneconomic holdings on which they had undoubtedly accumulated arrears. Many landlord families, such as the Martins of Connemara, who were already on the verge of bankruptcy before the famine, chose to support their tenantry and

in the process guaranteed the loss of their family estate, and, ironically, the eviction during the 1850s of many of their former tenants under the less benign regime of a new landlord.²²⁰

Conclusions

The Irish famine was more than a mere crop failure: its ramifications spread far beyond a serious food shortage though the significance of the latter should not be underestimated. The famine years gave rise to a fundamental disruption of many of the key elements in the Irish economy. As a result of the failure of the staple foodstuff of the Irish population food prices soared, giving rise in consequence to the major disturbance of existing wage rates and of the fundamental basis of pre-famine agriculture – the hiring of very large numbers of low-cost labourers or cottiers to participate in a highly intensive if technologically primitive form of agriculture.

Given the degree of disruption caused by the potato failure of 1846, the role of the British government as a relief agent should perhaps be seen in a more sympathetic light than it is generally regarded. Government policy was undoubtedly restricted by ideology – in particular the unwillingness for a long time to distribute free food – but so were the actions of charitable bodies such as the Society of Friends and late-twentieth century world famine relief operations remain no less hide-bound by ideological and economic considerations. In this light it does not appear appropriate to pronounce in an unduly critical fashion on the limitations of previous generations.

Perhaps the major problem which Ireland faced during the great famine was the fact that she had made many earlier appeals to British generosity, both public and private. These had been met, but in the process goodwill was eroded. The fact that earlier crises and indeed the 1845 potato failure had been met with apparent ease by operating a limited scheme of public works, and, in 1845, a restricted government food distribution system, may have blunted the appreciation of the magnitude of the problem which emerged in the autumn of 1846. Criticism is frequently voiced of the failure of the British government to directly intervene in the food market in that year, but the sheer size of the task and fact that it would undoubtedly have led to a boycott of the food trade by private traders made such an action of limited effectiveness.

Government policy can, however, be criticised on a number of fronts. While the chopping and changing of the composition of relief

committees, their terms of reference, their geographical boundaries and other matters may have had some rationale in bureaucratic circles, there is little doubt that valuable time and effort was wasted in such matters. Similarly, while the decision to switch from a massive public works programme to a mass feeding programme in the spring of 1847 reflects a measure of pragmatism and a willingness to depart from previous ideological beliefs, the decision to first abandon the relief works and then to set up soup kitchens with the major delay which ensued was deplorable. Public works should have been retained in some form, perhaps on a reduced scale, regardless of their drawbacks, until food kitchens became operational.

The major criticism of government policy, however, must be reserved for the decision to abandon any special famine relief programmes, to deny the continuation of an emergency after the autumn of 1847 despite the fact that distress remained prevalent in Ireland throughout 1849 and in some cases until 1850. This loss of interest was not unique to the government; most charitable agencies suffered a similar lack of stamina, but it suggests a callous indifference to continuing death and suffering once the novelty of the Irish famine had worn off. The absence of special government attention meant that the continuing Irish famine became not just an Irish charge, but a local charge with Erris property bearing the burden of Erris poverty and the administrative burden falling on the newly-established separate Irish poor law, a body specifically not designed to cope with major famine.

In commenting on government attitudes it seems vital to distinguish between officials in Whitehall, notably Trevelyan, and their counterparts in Dublin. The majority of Dublin and rural-based public officials emerge as displaying genuine concern for the problems of the Irish population and most of their reports display a keen appreciation of the broad ramifications of the famine on Irish society. They are thoroughly aware of the long-term consequences of diverting men from their own holdings to public works and suggest a compromise formula whereby men would be paid for relief works while encouraged to spend part of their time working on their own land – a proposal rejected with horror in London. It is easy to see why Trevelyan, Assistant Secretary to the Treasury, has been presented as a major scapegoat for the government's famine policy.²²¹ His tone of self-righteous moralising smacks of the worst of Victorian ideology. Yet he was only articulating what were commonly-held opinions, while it remains difficult to conclusively argue that greater sympathy with the Irish case would have automatically guaranteed a dramatically reduced mortality.

Any criticism of public response to the famine should not be restricted to the British government and its officials. The response of the Irish public – if we can talk of such a group – was highly ambiguous. Despite the subsequent capitalising on the event by nationalist writers, notably John Mitchel, the experience seems to have paralysed most influential Irishmen at the time. Daniel O'Connell merely relied on his traditional alliance with the Whigs and while his response may perhaps be excused on the grounds that his powers were waning – he died in 1847 – there is no strong identifiable call from Ireland for any particular measure to meet the famine. Even the call to prevent food exports was much stronger in retrospect that it was at the time. The inadequacy of the Irish response reflected the lack of political leadership and the strong divisions – both political and sectarian – which prevailed in Irish society at the time. These divisions also weakened the effectiveness of local relief administration and in the process threw a correspondingly greater burden on the over-worked public officials. In the process innocent people undoubtedly died. While the decision of the British government to establish a separate Irish poor law system in 1847, and in consequence to leave the costs of the famine as an Irish rather than a United Kingdom charge, can be criticised on the grounds that it effectively denied the reality of the Act of Union, the unwillingness of more prosperous parts of Ireland to shoulder even a small proportion of the burden of the poorer unions suggests that self-interest was not a British monopoly. In fact, that long-term burden of famine repayments was removed from Ireland in 1853 when Gladstone as chancellor of the exchequer assumed central government responsibility for famine debts and simultaneously harmonised Irish and British tax levels introducing income tax to Ireland for the first time.²²²

The famine must be seen as bringing about a major breakdown of Irish society. Family structures, traditions of hospitality, the practice of basic hygiene all appear to have been temporarily undermined by the catastrophe. Its broad impact must be seen as roughly akin to major wars or other natural disasters. Given such circumstances options such as emigration appear not as irrational, but as highly logical responses. The fact that the disaster lasted for several years strengthened the conviction for many that the future prospects of Ireland were grim and hence the attractions of England or America were correspondingly increased. However the famine did not initiate emigration; while numbers leaving rose sharply there still remains a measure of continuity with pre-famine trends. The high level of evictions may also perhaps be seen as another response to crisis: the

reaction of landlords facing financial ruin. For others the famine provided divine confirmation of the warnings of countless economic experts that many Irish farms were indeed impossibly small and hence afforded full justification for implementing a major reconstruction of their estates.

The famine experience does not lend itself to simple conclusions though many writers have hazarded such in the past. For example, it is difficult to decide whether the massive deaths which ensued should be seen as confirming that Ireland was doomed, in the 1840s or somewhat later, to suffer a major subsistence crisis, or whether the famine should not be seen as reflecting extraordinary bad luck. The fact that a high proportion of the Irish population in the 1840s lived in extremely vulnerable circumstances is not in doubt, but five years of major food failure was an extremely heavy burden to bear. Lives could undoubtedly have been saved by more judicious relief management but it is difficult to assess how this might best have been done given the limitations of the 1840s. Finally there remains the ongoing debate as to its long-term impact on Irish society—which further serves to indicate the contradictions in the event.

EPILOGUE: THE IMPACT OF THE FAMINE

There is little doubt that the famine was a significant event in nineteenth century Irish history, but its precise impact is a matter of some considerable debate. The famine has, at one stage or other, been held responsible for almost every subsequent occurrence in Irish history from the decline of the Irish language and an upsurge in religious devotion to sweeping changes in Irish agriculture and the engendering of a strong hostility to England which inevitably led to the movement for national independence. There is little doubt that conditions and attitudes in Ireland changed during the course of the nineteenth century. The population declined; the structure of agriculture was altered, housing conditions improved, diet became more varied, marriages became later and fewer. What is at issue is the extent to which the famine can be held responsible for these changes. Traditional interpretations have generally regarded the famine as the critical factor though more recent scholarship has come to question certain aspects of the 'watershed' theory, arguing that the post-famine decades merely saw a continuation of trends already set in train in earlier decades and presenting a picture which seems to emphasize continuity instead of the hitherto accepted picture of a fundamental change. As in many other areas of Irish history the conclusions which historians now draw are more tentative than in the past. An earlier certainty has given way to ambiguity, though the recent work by Mokyr may be regarded as an exception to this trend.

We may at least be certain of one change. In the century prior to the famine Irish population quadrupled; in the following century it was halved. Population decline, once begun, was not conclusively reversed until the 1960s. However, there remains the doubt as to whether Irish population might not have stabilised and begun to decline in the middle of the nineteenth century, famine or no famine. On this point we can only speculate, but there is tentative evidence that birth and marriage rates were already falling before the famine and there is absolutely no doubt that emigration had already risen to substantial levels by the early 1840s. In this most central area the catastrophe of the famine would seem to have only accelerated trends which were already in train.

The impact on agriculture is also a matter of some debate.¹ Cormac O Grada's estimates of the structure of agricultural output

- 164 Collison Black, *Economic thought*, pp 101-2.
 165 McDowell, *Jr. administration*, p. 204.
 166 Collison Black, *Economic thought*, p. 174.
 167 *Ibid.*, p. 192.
 168 *Second report of the commissioners appointed to consider and recommend a general system of railways in Ireland 1837-8* (145), xxv.
 169 Kevin B. Nowlan, 'The political background', in R. Dudley Edwards and T. Desmond Williams (ed.), *The great famine* (Dublin, 1956), pp 159-61.
 170 *Poor inquiry, third report*, section IV.
 171 *Ibid.*
 172 Collison Black, *Economic thought*, p. 176.
 173 Adams, *Irish emigration*, p. 167.
 174 Collison Black, *Economic thought*, p. 213.
 175 *Ibid.*, p. 209.
 176 *Poor inquiry, third report*, section IV.
 177 Hickey, 'Four peninsular parishes' p. 208.
 178 *Remarks of C. C. Lewis on Poor Laws, Ireland 1837* (90) vol. li.
 179 *Poor inquiry, third report*, p. 25.
 180 *Ibid.*, p. 5.
 181 Collison Black, *Economic thought*, p. 100.
 182 *Ibid.*, p. 107.
 183 *First report of George Nicholls, Esq. on poor laws, Ireland, 1837* (69) li, p. 4.
 184 Collison Black, *Economic thought*, p. 110.
 185 *First report*, p. 38.
 186 O Grada, 'Malthus', in Murphy (ed.), *Economists and the Irish economy*, p. 80.
 187 Mokyr, *Why Ireland starved*, p. 51.
 188 *Ibid.*, p. 64.
 189 F. J. Carney, 'Pre-famine Irish population: the evidence from the Trinity College estates' in *Ir. Econ. & Soc. Hist.*, ii (1975), pp 35-45.
 190 David Dickson, 'Famine in Ireland, 1700-1775: A review', paper read to conference of Economic and Social History Society of Ireland, Derry, September 1981.
 191 O Grada, 'Malthus', p. 82.
 192 O'Neill, 'The state poverty and distress in Ireland', p. 133.
 193 *Ibid.*, p. 9.
 194 Quoted in Sir William Wilde, *Census of Ireland 1851. Part V. Table of deaths*, p. 214.
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 196 *Poor inquiry*, 1835 (369), xxxii, Suppl. 2, app. B, part II.
 197 *Ibid.*, app. E.
 198 P. M. A. Bourke, 'The use of the potato crop in pre-famine Ireland' in *Statistical and social inquiry society of Ireland, journal*, xxi pt. 6 (1968), p. 93.
 199 Joel Mokyr, 'Uncertainty and pre-famine Irish agriculture', in Devine and Dickson, *op. cit.* p. 93.
 200 O Grada, 'Malthus', p. 84.
 201 *Poor inquiry*, app. E., p. 17.
 202 Cullen, 'Irish history without the potato' in *Past and Present*, 40, (1968) pp 72-83.
 203 *Poor Inquiry*, App. A. 1836 (369), xxxii, Pt. I, p. 356.
 204 *Ibid.*, p. 361.
 205 *Ibid.*, p. 381.

PART 2 (pp 53-61)

- 1 W. Steuart Trench, *Realities of Irish life*, (London, 1869), pp 101-2.
 2 M. Bergman, 'The potato blight in the Netherlands and its social consequences (1845-1847)' in *International review of social history*, 17, pt. 3 (1967) pp 391-431; Joel Mokyr, 'Industrialisation and poverty in Ireland and the Netherlands' in *Journal of interdisciplinary history*, x, no. 3 (1980) pp 981-1008.
 3 P. M. A. Bourke, 'The weather and the great Irish famine', seminar paper delivered University College Dublin, 1982.
 4 Thomas P. O'Neill, 'The organization and administration of relief, 1845-52', in Edwards and Williams, *Great famine*, p. 210.
 5 'Return showing proportion of actual crop lost', published in *Correspondence explanatory of the measures adopted by her Majesty's government for the relief of distress arising from the failure of the potato crop in Ireland, 1846*, (736) xxxvii, p. 36.
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 7 *Correspondence from July 1846 to January 1847 relating to the measures adopted for the relief of distress in Ireland, 1847* (761), li.
 8 *Poor inquiry*, app. E.
 9 *Reports of the poor law commissioners for 1847* App. A, no. VIII, report, Capt. Sir Thomas Ross, R. N. Dingle.
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 11 Calculated from *Returns of agricultural produce in Ireland, in the year 1848*.
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 13 A. Sen, *Poverty and famines, an essay on entitlements and deprivation* (Oxford, 1981), p. 58.
 14 Bourke, 'Use of potato crop in pre-famine Ireland'.
 15 John Mitchel, *The last conquest of Ireland (perhaps)* (Dublin, 1873), p. 208.
 16 P. M. A. Bourke, 'The Irish grain trade' in *J.H.S.* 20, no. 78 (1976) p. 165.
 17 Tom Harper, 'Entitlements during the Irish famine', unpublished M.A. thesis, N.U.I. (U.C.D.) 1983, p. 6.
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 19 *Relief of distress*, 29 Aug. 1846. D. Corneille to Trevelyan.
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 24 *Transactions of the central relief committee of the Society of Friends during the famine in Ireland in 1846 and 1847* (Dublin, 1852), App. III
 25 *July 1846 to January 1847 relief of distress*, Capt. Hutcheson, 19 Dec. 1846.
 26 *Society of Friends*, p. 158.
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 28 *Ibid.*, p. 104.
 29 *Correspondence from January to March 1847, relating to the measures adopted for the relief of distress in Ireland*. Board of works series (part II), 1847 (797), lii, 8 Jan. 1847.

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³¹ *Ibid.*, App. III, 13 Dec. 1846.
³² *Ibid.*, p. 184, 10 Feb. 1847.
³³ *Correspondence, Jan. March 1847 relief of distress*, 7 Feb. 1847.
³⁴ *Society of Friends*, p. 109.
³⁵ *Correspondence, Jan. Mar. 1847. relief of distress*, 9 Jan. 1847.
³⁶ *Society of Friends*, p. 159.
³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 53.
³⁸ *Irish journals of Elizabeth Smith*, p. 131.
³⁹ Donnelly, *Cork*, p. 131.
⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 73.
⁴¹ *Relief of distress*.
⁴² Sir Charles Trevelyan, *The Irish crisis*, (London, 1850), p. 4.
⁴³ *Relief of distress* Knaresborough to Redington, 8 Dec. 1846.
⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, Lt. Inglis, Co. Limerick, 19 Dec. 1846.
⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 28 Oct. 1846, Jones to Trevelyan.
⁴⁶ *Correspondence, Jan. to March, relief of distress* 30 Jan. 1847, Lieut. Downes.
⁴⁷ Calculated from *Returns of agricultural produce in Ireland in the year 1847. Part I. 1847-8, (923), lvii, Part II. Stock. 1847-8, (1000), lvii, 109. Returns of agricultural produce 1850.*
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⁵² *Irish journals of Elizabeth Smith*, 3 May 1847, p. 142.
⁵³ Trevelyan, *Irish crisis*, p. 71.
⁵⁴ Bowen, *Protestant crusade*, p. 179.
⁵⁵ A. R. G. Griffiths, 'The Irish Board of Works in the famine years' in *Historical Journal*, xiii, 4 (1970), p. 635.
⁵⁶ *Irish journals of Elizabeth Smith* p. 39.
⁵⁷ *Correspondence explanatory of the measures adopted*, Routh to Trevelyan, 16 Apr. 1846.
⁵⁸ Bowen, *Souperism*, pp 12 and 192.
⁵⁹ Bowen, *Protestant crusade*, p. 182.
⁶⁰ *Irish journals of Elizabeth Smith*, 21 Jan. 1847, p. 125.
⁶¹ M. W. Flinn, 'Malthus, emigration and potatoes in the Scottish north-west, 1770-1870', in L. M. Cullen and T. C. Smout (ed.), *Comparative aspects of Scottish and Irish economic and social history*, (Edinburgh 1978), pp 47-64 and T. C. Smout, 'Famine and famine relief in Scotland', in Cullen and Smout op. cit. pp 21-31. For England in the 1840s see John Foster, *Class struggle and the industrial revolution. Early industrial capitalism in three English towns* (1977 ed.).
⁶² Trevelyan, *Irish crisis*, p. 1.
⁶³ Norman Gash, *Mr. Secretary Peel*, (London 1961) p. 223.
⁶⁴ Norman Gash, *Sir Robert Peel*, (London 1976) p. 534.
⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 553.
⁶⁶ Kevin B. Nowlan, 'The political background', in Edwards and Williams, *Great famine*, p. 141.
⁶⁷ I do not intend to discuss the political events of the famine years in any detail. These are thoroughly dealt with in Kevin B. Nowlan's essay, referred to in the above footnote.

- ⁶⁸ O'Neill, 'Administration of relief', in Edwards and Williams, *Great famine*, p. 222. and Gash, *Sir Robert Peel*, p. 609.
⁶⁹ O'Neill, 'Administration of relief', p. 222.
⁷⁰ Quoted in Gash, *Sir Robert Peel*, p. 610.
⁷¹ Harper, 'Entitlements', App. and Gash, *Sir Robert Peel*, p. 622.
⁷² O'Neill, 'Administration of relief', p. 213.
⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 221.
⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, pp 215-6.
⁷⁵ *Correspondence explanatory of the measures adopted*, Dobree to Trevelyan, 5 June 1846.
⁷⁶ Bourke, 'Irish grain trade', in *I.H.S.* 20 (1976) p. 163.
⁷⁷ O'Neill, 'Administration of relief', p. 227.
⁷⁸ *Correspondence explanatory of the measures adopted*, Pole to Trevelyan, 18 April 1846.
⁷⁹ O'Neill 'Administration of relief', pp 223-4.
⁸⁰ Trevelyan, *Irish crisis*, p. 30.
⁸¹ *Relief of distress*, Trevelyan to Jones, 5 Oct. 1846.
⁸² O'Neill, 'Administration of relief', p. 225 and *Relief of distress*, Trevelyan to Jones 22 Dec. 1846.
⁸³ *Ibid.*, William Fraser, 10 Oct. 1846.
⁸⁴ Maurice R. O'Connell (ed.), *The correspondence of Daniel O'Connell*, viii, 1846-7, (Dublin 1980), letter no. 3301, 8 Oct. 1846, p. 111.
⁸⁵ *Relief of distress*, Russell to Redcliff, 15 Aug. 1846.
⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, Rev. Theobald Mathew to Trevelyan, 20 Nov. 1846.
⁸⁷ *Society of Friends*, p. 57.
⁸⁸ Griffiths, 'The Irish Board of Works in the famine years', p. 635.
⁸⁹ *Relief of distress*, pp 78-9.
⁹⁰ *Correspondence explanatory of the measures adopted*, 21 Mar. 1846.
⁹¹ *Ibid.*, Board of Works to Trevelyan, 7 April 1846.
⁹² *Relief of distress, July 1846 to January 1847.*
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⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 21 Mar. 1846.
⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 23 Mar. 1846.
⁹⁶ *Relief of distress*, Jones to Trevelyan 5 July 1846.
⁹⁷ Calculated from the table in *Relief of distress*, pp 78-9.
⁹⁸ *Correspondence explanatory of the measures adopted*, Jones to Earl of Lincoln, 9 April 1846.
⁹⁹ *Relief of distress*, 31 Aug. 1846.
¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, Goodmill to Jones, 31 Aug. 1846.
¹⁰¹ Griffiths 'The Irish Board of Works in the famine years', p. 637.
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