

Baron Monteagle of Brandon and the Famine, 1845 - 1848



by Charlotte Murphy

Ln the heart of Limerick city there is a peaceful and leafy public park. A very tall column, erected in 1830, dominates its beauty. Few people know the name of the man in whose honour this monument was raised. In fact, it was built to express the city's admiration for Thomas Spring Rice, 1st Baron Monteagle of Brandon, (1790-1866).⁽¹⁾

Spring Rice was born on 8 February, 1790, at 21 Mungret Street, Limerick.⁽²⁾ He was returned as a Whig M.P. for the city in 1820 and went on to become Under Secretary of State for the Home Department 1827; Secretary to the Treasury 1830-1834; Colonial Secretary 1834, and Chancellor of the Exchequer 1835-1839. Baron Monteagle of Brandon was the title he chose when he was raised to the peerage in 1839.⁽³⁾

Blight destroyed the potato harvests in Ireland in 1845 and 1846, but it was only when on his way home to Mount Trenchard, Co. Limerick,⁽⁴⁾ in September of 1846, that Monteagle saw at first hand the extent of the problem. He wrote to Charles Edward Trevelyan, Assistant Secretary to the Treasury, describing the terrifying scene which greeted him on his journey from Dublin to County Limerick. "I have travelled about 60 English miles from Dublin to this place without seeing one single potato field which was not blighted".⁽⁵⁾

The Earl of Bessborough, who had been appointed Lord Lieutenant of Ireland in July, 1846, wrote to Monteagle concerning the new Famine Relief Act. Bessborough wanted to interpret it in such a way as to enable him to employ people upon schemes which could benefit individual landlords, in other words he wanted to engage people in profitable work. A correspondence he had with the Prime Minister, Lord John Russell, led him [Bessborough] to believe that this might be possible, but in order to get more clarity in the matter he sent Redington, the Under Secretary for Ireland, to London. Redington had a conversation with Trevelyan, Assistant Secretary to the Treasury, who was unsympathetic to Bessborough's idea for he saw it as a means of favouring Irish



Engraving of Thomas Spring Rice, 1st Baron Monteagle, in the 1830s.
Photo, Trinity College, Cambridge.

landlords. In order to be truly just, the government would have to extend such preferential treatment to all the landlords of the United Kingdom and Trevelyan felt that parliament would never approve of such a step. Bessborough asked Monteagle to try and change Trevelyan's mind. "You know Trevelyan well, you might be able to open his eyes ..."⁽⁶⁾ This gives some indication of the influence which Monteagle had in government circles. It also shows that his opinions, which differed from those of the Cabinet, were known amongst those in power in Ireland.

In reply to this letter from the Lord Lieutenant, Monteagle expressed his opinion that the distress was too

widespread for public works to provide an adequate solution when they were limited chiefly to the building of roads and bridges: "If you ask me to suggest roads in this neighbourhood which I can make or mend so as to provide employment for a starving people I can hardly suggest to you employment enough to furnish our people with a breakfast".⁽⁷⁾ However, he felt that private means offered an ample source of support for the people; the system of taxation should compel landlords to exert themselves in order to help the starving people. Monteagle went on to state that he hoped that Bessborough could have the Relief Act moulded and fashioned in such a manner "so as to make it applicable to works of a

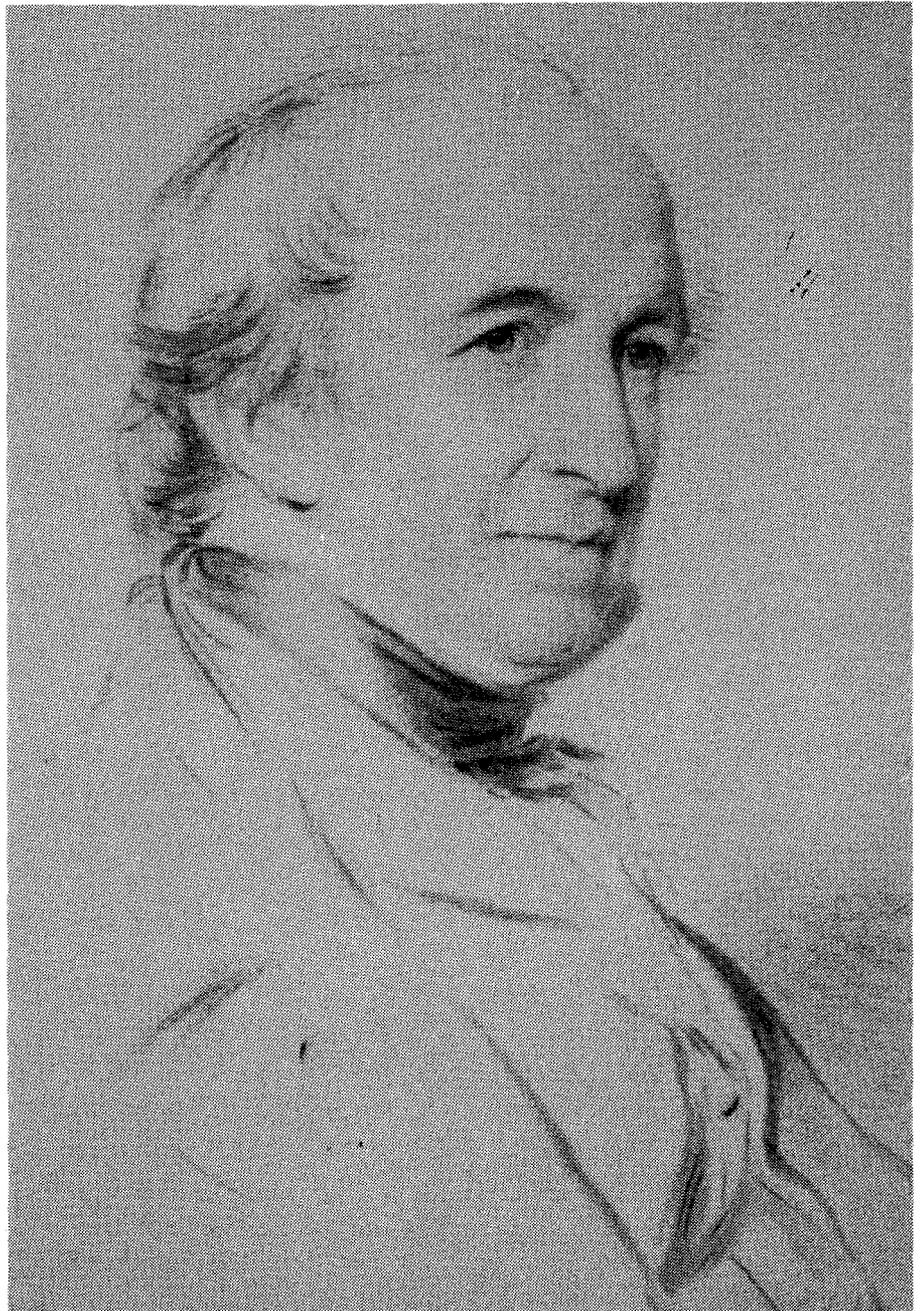
different description from roads and bridges ..."⁽⁸⁾ If this could not be done, Monteagle felt that neither the Lord Lieutenant nor the people of Ireland themselves would escape the most terrible consequences, for he stated in his letter to Bessborough: "the sooner you determine that Parliament shall meet in November to amend the law, the greater will be your safety and that of the Irish public likewise".⁽⁹⁾

Monteagle had views on handling the crisis in Ireland which differed very considerably from those of his Whig colleagues in power. He, of course, lived for some months in every year in Ireland; he saw for himself people dying from lack of food. By contrast, the reactions of the Prime Minister, Lord John Russell, the Assistant Secretary to the Treasury, Charles Trevelyan, and the Chief Secretary for Ireland, Labouchere, seemed superficial, vindictive and silly. They seemed unaware of the depth of the tragedy. This is shown clearly in Trevelyan's answer to Bessborough's request in relation to profitable work. He feared that it would show favour to Irish landlords; the country was full of people dying from starvation and the Treasury was concerned about appearances.

The attitude of the Prime Minister was strange for a man from whom one would expect a detailed and comprehensive understanding of the country he governed ... As his biographer Prest has written: "Lord John identified the Irish land owners as the authors of the famine, and he bitterly accused his old colleague Monteagle and his fellow landlords of seeking reward for the duties they had neglected".⁽¹⁰⁾ This was certainly a very superficial conclusion on the part of Lord John Russell. Economists nowadays, writing on the subject of Ireland's Great Famine, do not give just one reason for the dreadful situation in which the country found itself. The terrible crisis of the 1840s has been the subject of a detailed economic analysis by Joel Mokyr who has the following to say about the causes of Irish poverty:

Why did Ireland starve? To start with, it should be emphasised that Irish poverty was not really one single 'event'. Rather, we are dealing with a series of related but separate phenomena which did not necessarily share the same causal mechanisms. Irish agriculture was poor and backward. Ireland did not undergo an industrial revolution. The Irish potato crop failed in the 1840s. These three 'events' were all part of Ireland's economic plight, but they were not necessarily caused by the same factors. Nor did they inexorably lead to each other although feedback mechanisms no doubt existed. It should, then, come as no surprise, that the question "Why Ireland starved?" cannot be answered in a single sentence".⁽¹¹⁾

At a more local level Monteagle had pressing worries about getting Indian

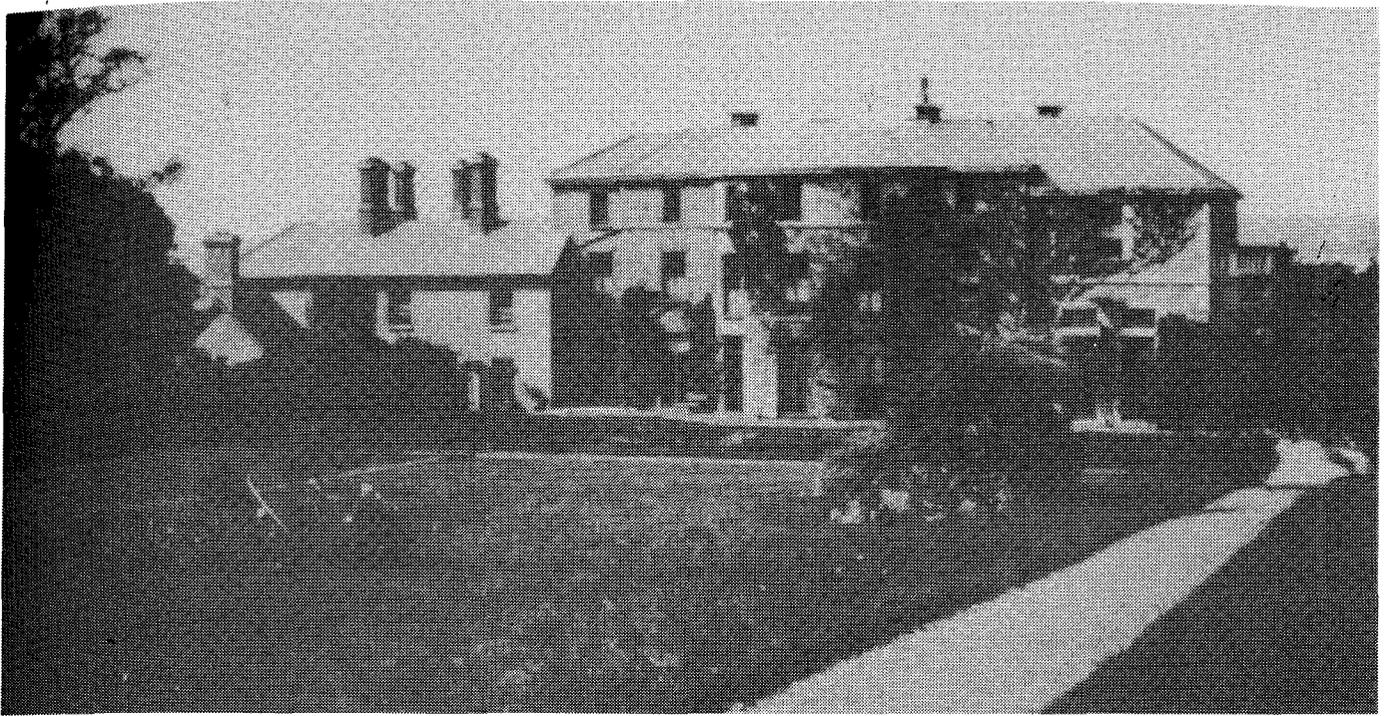


Thomas Spring Rice. Engraving from a portrait by George Richmond.

meal safely from Limerick City to Foynes, the village on the banks of the Shannon estuary which is close to Mount Trenchard. Price was his main worry. Costs were already high for Indian meal, but they would go considerably higher when the winter advanced and demand increased. Another worry Monteagle had was the problem of milling the Indian corn. In his district there were three mills, apart from the mill at Askeaton which was owned by the Russells, a rich family of mill-owners from Limerick. The mill at Newbridge could only be used for wheat; the one at Loughill was almost useless and that at Mullagh could supply only 120 barrels a week. When demand for the milled corn became really pressing, he feared that the people would be in the hands of 'a close monopoly'. He could see nothing but disaster ahead. "Already we hear that the people have been killing sheep in the fields. This portends a desert first and then a battlefield".⁽¹²⁾

Since returning to Ireland in September, 1846, Monteagle had attended the meetings of the Relief Committee at Shanagolden. Here he found that the work was honestly and carefully done. The Committee had a fund of £465, made up of a government grant of £180 and the remainder from private subscription.

Labouchere, the Chief Secretary for Ireland, in September, 1846, wrote a letter to all county lieutenants. It contained a recommendation which was to be passed along to all relief committees that Indian meal should be sold in small quantities at the "price of ordinary years".⁽¹³⁾ Monteagle felt that this instruction showed just how little Labouchere knew of Ireland, for Indian meal was a new food import to the United Kingdom as a whole. The letter also demonstrated the Secretary's lack of knowledge in other areas. The Shanagolden Relief Committee was selling meal at 1/- per stone but the purchase price, which the committee had to pay,



Mount Trenchard, the home of Lord Monteagle.

was 1/6 per stone. If the cost of carriage from Limerick and the storage and clerical expenses were added, the price should be 1/8 per stone. In order to encourage private capital to import and sell food the Shanagolden Committee eventually decided to charge 1/6 per stone. This compromise would appear to be Monteagle's idea, for he continued: "The introduction of private capital is the more important because from the lamentable universality of the failure this year persons of a better class will fall on the Indian meal and in assisting the class below them we should not inflict a wrong on the other occupiers of land".⁽¹⁴⁾

In a letter to Lord Clarendon, President of the Board of Trade, Monteagle poured out his feelings of frustration, exhaustion and loneliness:

Relief Committees, Special Presentment sessions, meetings of Magistrates and many other hard things with hard names have occupied me from morning till night and I am now writing after all my party have long since gone to bed, with the agreeable prospects of beginning work again before breakfast.⁽¹⁵⁾

He also made it clear in the same letter that it was his idea to raise the price of the Indian meal which was being sold by the Shanagolden Relief Committee. "I venture to propose the simpler but truer principle of following the fluctuations of the market. My Committee were with me but what is better the people acquiesced. Still it is alarming to contemplate how high prices are likely to go".

Monteagle wrote to Labouchere, the Chief Secretary for Ireland, and criticised his instructions to the relief committees: "In two essential principles they will not work".⁽¹⁶⁾ Labouchere wanted the relief committees to deal with the crisis parish

by parish. But the parishes, as Monteagle pointed out, were not geographical units. For example, one part of the parish of Nantenan, Co. Limerick, was ten miles from the other part and, in fact, was much nearer to the parish of Rathronan. This irregular division of parishes occurred in many places all over Ireland. The result of Labouchere's instruction would be that detached sections of parishes would get no help at all. Monteagle's solution was simple. "You must leave the power to the Lieutenants to strike out the Relief Districts without limitation. If you define you will go wrong".⁽¹⁷⁾

In Monteagle's opinion Labouchere was also incorrect in relation to the composition of the committees. Monteagle felt that anyone who subscribed more than £1 should be a member. This would encourage people to give money. "further you exclude the R. Catholic curates who have been our most active and useful coadjutors zealous and earnest in the performance of all those functions".⁽¹⁸⁾

The Earl of Clarendon wrote to Monteagle and stated that neither himself nor the Chancellor of the Exchequer had heard anything of the new suggestion from the Board of Works for the construction of railroad causeways as an alternative form of relief work. At the latest Cabinet meeting, held to consider the problem of supplying food in Ireland, it was decided, stated Clarendon, that the difficulties of applying money to the construction of railways were insuperable. Both Clarendon and the rest of the Cabinet considered that the plan of the Board of Works was better adapted for the wasting of money than anything else. He listed the problem in the following manner:

.... for how are you to get over engineering obstacles or to settle the best

lines or to obtain the land, or to adjust the compensation I am at a loss to imagine and the more I think of it the more impracticable it appears to me however good in principle or desirable in practice it may be.⁽¹⁹⁾

This was not the only discouraging letter Monteagle received from Britain. Trevelyan's answer to the problem of the lack of facilities for grinding corn was to arrange for the grinding of as much corn and meal as possible in Britain thus "leaving the mills in Ireland to the private hands".⁽²⁰⁾ This was the very situation that Monteagle feared, for it put the people at the mercy of monopolies. In relation to the other topic which Monteagle raised, that of the purchase of handmills, Trevelyan had the following equally frustrating and unhelpful comment to make:

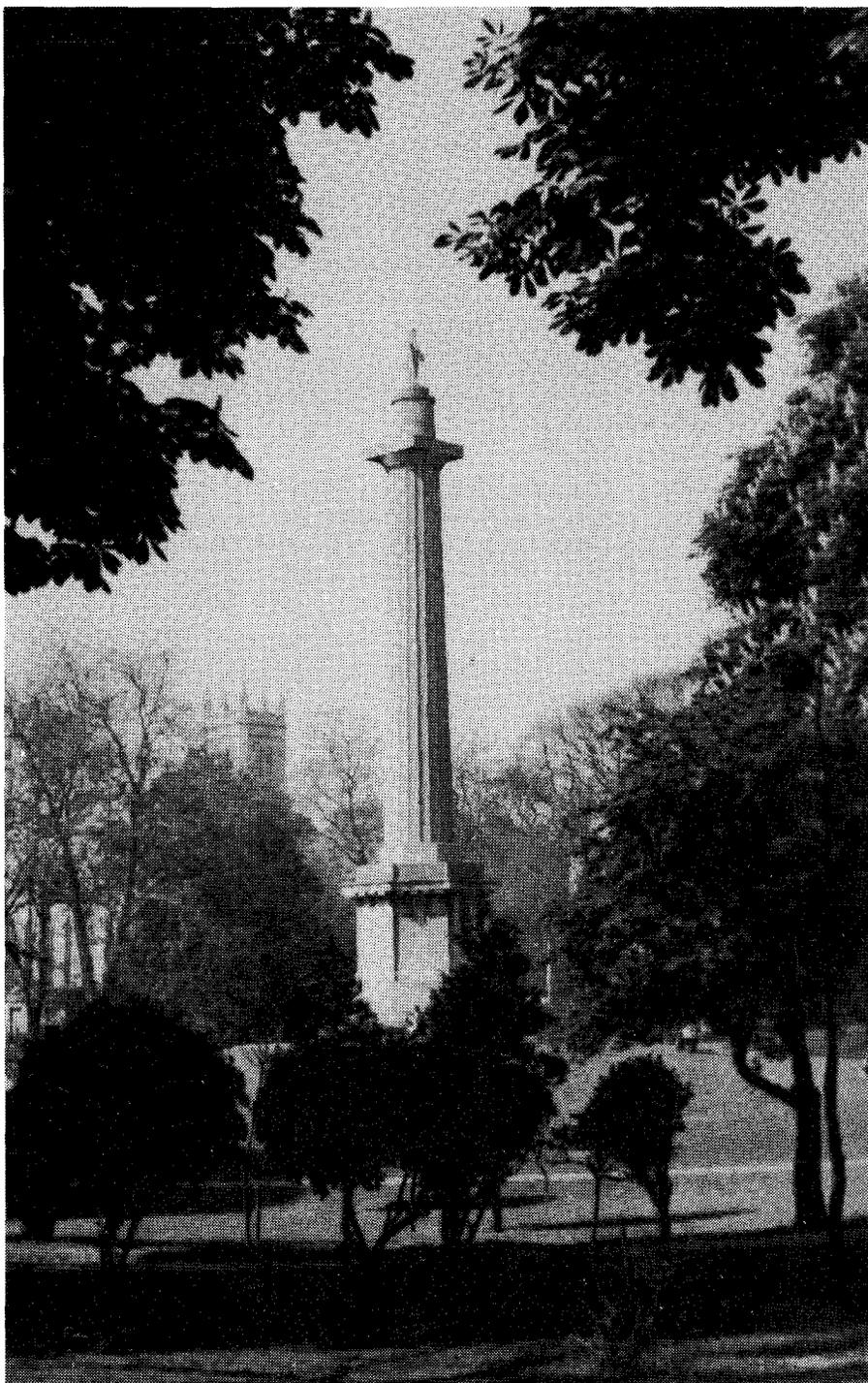
Handmills, with the use of which I was familiar in India, would, I think be a valuable resource, and I am to procure some steel mills for Sir R. Routh as specimens when I receive proper directions from him; but as far as I am at present able to judge it would be difficult for the government to supply such mills in any quantity likely to be of use and it is a branch of operations which ought to be left to private management.⁽²¹⁾

The huge contrast between Monteagle's attitude to solving the problem of starvation in Ireland and that of the government is explained by two basic facts: Monteagle was an Irishman living part of the time in Ireland. As Mokyr has stated, the contrast arose because "Ireland was considered by Britain as alien and even hostile country".⁽²²⁾ He goes on to amplify this theory in some detail: "it has also been pointed out by Lebow (1977)

that the British attitude to Irish poverty was quite different from British views toward their own poor. While in Britain poverty was considered the result of economic fluctuations and structural changes in the economy, Irish poverty was viewed as being caused by laziness, indifference and ineptitude. Consequently, the British government did not bear the same responsibility toward the Irish poor as they did in Britain".⁽²³⁾

As time passed Monteagle grew angrier and angrier with his Whig colleagues. The anger burst out in a letter he wrote to Lord Bessborough in October, 1846: "It is childish not to be prepared to act with vigour and resolution in the exigency in which we are placed. I am both an Economist and a Treasury man but after what I have seen I know the government must be prepared to face much responsibility if they wish to keep something together. If it were not for the happy accident that I am ready to spend £4,500 of my own money in aid of a similar sum at Foynes this country would be in reality as well as in figure *in a blaze*. But even with the prospect of this, for the works cannot begin quite yet, we shall have infinite difficulty in struggling through".⁽²⁴⁾ This letter gives a frightening idea of the lack of interest displayed by the London government in the starving people of Ireland. Monteagle went on to demonstrate further the inadequate nature of the relief which did arrive. He stated that at Shanagolden and its surrounding townlands there were 250 families suffering from severe hunger, yet the works could support 35 labourers and no more. "Is not this one of the greatest trials to which human endurance can be subjected?"⁽²⁵⁾ he asked of the Lord Lieutenant, Lord Bessborough, in passionate language.

Nassau Senior, the economist, visited Lord Monteagle at Mount Trenchard in 1852. During the visit he had long discussions with both Monteagle and his eldest son, Stephen, as to whether or not they considered the relief measures taken during the famine to be effective. Senior was shown some of the relief works constructed at the time. One such piece of work was a road half a mile in length which ended in a bog; it was of little use to anyone and yet it had cost the barony £2,000. The only power that the local ratepayers and landlords had over the relief works was that they were permitted to make suggestions as to what they considered were the most useful projects to be undertaken. They also had to propose works which would employ all who were in need. According to Monteagle, this was an impossible task when one considered the limitations imposed by the government. The works could not benefit any private individual. This was the law under the Labour Rate Act, which according to Monteagle was not introduced until the middle of August, 1846, "and hurried through in ten days after almost all the Irish Members had left London".⁽²⁶⁾



The Thomas Spring Rice memorial in the People's Park, Limerick.

All proposed projects for relief had to be put to a special public baronial meeting and the selection of the projects also had to be made in public. Mobs besieged the meeting, and threats and violence became commonplace. One hundred and fifty proposals were made at one meeting in the Shanagolden session house. All of them were forwarded to the Board of Works, for in the tumult and confusion it proved impossible to make any decisions. A very vivid description of the riotous behaviour in the session house was given by Monteagle's eldest son:

Our small sessions house was filled with a mob of rioters, heaped upon one another's shoulders. Everybody was resolved to carry his own project, and to

defeat his neighbour's. It was a scene of confusion and violence such as no one who has not seen an Irish mob half mad with excitement can conceive. If the government would have acceded to our request and divided our barony (which is half as big as a small English county) into two or three manageable districts we might have exercised some discretion; but in defiance of our remonstrances, they chose to throw 150 square miles into one relief district, and the consequence was, that we were neither assisted by local knowledge, nor protected by local influence.⁽²⁷⁾

The reality which comes through from these observations is one of total and absolute confusion. It appears, if

Monteagle and his son are to be believed and there seems no reason not to believe them, that everything the government decided upon turned out to be at best inefficient and at worst disastrous.

Another serious complaint which Monteagle made was about the exposure to the elements of the old and the sick involved in the relief works. The winter of 1846-47 was extremely severe. The workers were men, women and children. Some of the men were very old; all were miserably clothed and ill-fed.

Because the government would not import grain, all food supplies were left in private hands; therefore, food was not always available and even when it was available it was often too expensive for the people who were most in need. The results were fatal. Monteagle described, in vivid detail, the awful fate of these poor people:

Some were rapidly carried off by fever or dysentery, others perished gradually; their legs swelled, their strength failed; many went into the workhouses to die. Many are there still, men and women not forty years old, who look as if they were seventy or eighty; and, in fact, are as irrecoverably infirm as if they were eighty.⁽²⁸⁾

It appears that Monteagle lost belief in laissez-faire economics, if his comment to Senior about the government purchasing grain is taken at face value. He stated in a nutshell the inadequacies of the system in a famine-stricken Ireland. Private capital would not always ensure that food was there to be purchased because the returns were not attractive enough, and even if food was there to be bought the really poor could not always afford it. It is logical to assume that Monteagle would not have adhered rigidly to a philosophy of non-interference in economic matters in the face of this great tragedy. This assumption rests upon other evidence also. In a letter which he wrote to Sir Robert Peel as early as October, 1845, Monteagle had the following to say about economics:

.... but if we have to deal with a famishing people then adherence to ordinary rules becomes impossible and human life must be saved even though the principles of ordinary Economical science are set aside for the time.⁽²⁹⁾

It does not seem too fanciful to assume that Ireland's great trial would not have led to so many deaths and hardship if Monteagle had had a seat in the Cabinet during the terrible years 1845-1850.

Monteagle further told Senior that he would have made the relief districts much smaller and would have allowed work to be done that would benefit private individuals. The able-bodied would, therefore, have had productive work and the old, the sick and the children would have been given relief in their homes. Funding for all work should have come from both local and central funds. He acknowledged that this



Bust of Thomas Spring Rice.

system would also have had its problems but it would have provided relief for the hungry and in the end there would have been something to show for both the work and the money spent on it.

The government believed that the landlords had both the duty and the power to provide for all on their estates during the famine. Monteagle thought that this idea was completely illogical. He pointed out that it was the same as expecting the owners of houses on the Marine Parade in Brighton to employ and feed all who rented their rooms. There was another difficulty here which the government did not seem to understand. The Irish landlord could not limit the number of sub-tenants on his estate; he had the legal power to do so but if he enforced his power he ran the risk of being shot by one of the disappointed Irish.⁽³⁰⁾

Lord Monteagle always saw emigration as a solution for Ireland's problems of poverty and unemployment. During these famine years he was chairman of a Select Committee of the House of Lords which looked into what was termed "colonization from Ireland".⁽³¹⁾ However, he made it clear that he did not see emigration as the only solution to all of the problems:

.... one who like me has given up the last two years to the subject, one who, without considering it "the one thing needful" believes it [emigration] to be a needful thing and without which in many cases, all others will be fruitless or rather cannot be tried at all.⁽³²⁾

A man of Monteagle's obvious compassion looked desperately for a solution. Around him there was little but death and misery. A modern appraisal gives us some idea of the vast horror of the starvation Monteagle had to look at every day he was in Ireland.

Ireland's time on the cross - the terrible subsistence crisis of the 1840s - has been the subject of a monumental econometric inquiry by Joel Mokyr. Varying estimates of famine mortality abound in the academic and popular accounts. The tendency in recent years has been to settle for a figure under the politically emotive one million mark. Mokyr revises the revisionists, insisting that the true incident of famine deaths has been substantially underestimated. He offers instead a set of estimates ranging from 1.1 to 1.5 million. Even the lowest

bound estimate, it will be noted, is far in excess of Cousen's elaborate and widely accepted computation of 0.8 million.⁽³³⁾

Monteagle saw people die daily. An insight into both his compassionate nature and his practical attitude to life is shown in a letter which he wrote to Lord Clarendon, who had become Lord Lieutenant on the death of Lord Bessborough:

No man alive looks more anxiously for an honest excuse to return to England than I do and John Russell [the Prime Minister] expressing a wish that I should see him on Emigration subjects would seem to furnish a justification. But I dare not yield to it, till I can have arranged as best I can to do so for the employment of my poor neighbours during the Winter. When that is done he may command me by word of mouth.⁽³⁴⁾

The basic practicality of providing work and therefore food was Monteagle's first priority. Issues such as emigration were pushed into the background for some time.

However, while wanting nobody to die of starvation, Monteagle believed that the country was over-populated. He summed up this idea of his in a very long letter which he wrote on 21 October, 1848, to Lord Clarendon on the subject of emigration: "It is because our population is in a state of local congestion which brings imminent peril on the whole body politic that we are unable to apply those remedies which require time for their application and operations". He went on to state that emigration should be supported by an Irish Land Tax and again took issue with Trevelyan:

Trevelyan in his 'Irish Crisis' (he will have another to write before long) seems to think that Emigration is sought as a substitute for other improvements. On the contrary it is in many instances a condition necessary to such improvements.

But was emigration the solution to Ireland's problems or was Trevelyan correct in believing that it was a substitute for real improvements? An historian writing on nineteenth century emigration from Ireland has the following comment to make on this issue:

It [emigration] facilitated the elimination of landless labourers, but made practicable the survival of large families on 'uneconomic' holdings by injecting into the farming sector a steady flow of cash remittances from relatives already prospering overseas. It cushioned the impact of industrial reorientation in Ulster, but helped discourage the investment of capital in other regions by depleting population, and with it potential level of home consumption. It restricted unemployment, but also raised the ratio of unemployable dependents to persons of working age. In short as many contemporaries believed, emigration was



Part of the front wall of the Newcastlewest Workhouse.

a palliative drug to which Irish society had grown addicted. The Irish as a race might benefit by their dispersion; yet Ireland as a nation could only suffer.⁽³⁵⁾

Monteagle, when he encouraged emigration meant well, but it is doubtful if the plan really helped Ireland in the long term.

Monteagle's correspondence at this time demonstrates his endless dedication to his duty. It also makes clear his understanding of the details involved in the heartbreaking job which he had set himself. He had the interest and he had the knowledge which the government in London so sadly lacked. If he had had a post in the Cabinet, or better still, if he had led the Whig party, which he could have done if he had had enough drive and ambition, this period in Ireland's history might not have been so tragic.

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