

Thaddeus O'Malley

The Reverend Thaddeus O'Malley, priest and politician, was born in Garryowen in the year 1796, and was ordained a priest at the age of 23. As a young man he worked in an American parish, but being of independent spirit, he was suspended by his Bishop and returned to Ireland in 1827.

When the famous Bishop of Kildare and Leighlin, Dr. James Warren Doyle, popularly known as J.K.L. died, Father O'Malley took up his cudgels in favour of poor-law and in opposition to O'Connell. He published a series of public letters on the advantages of poor-law and also on a system of national education, and in one of the latter he attacked Dr. McHale very bitterly. For this he was suspended by his Bishop, but shortly afterwards restored.

About 1840 he received the Government appointment of Rector of the Catholic University of Malta. However, he was unwilling to submit to protestant laymen in matters of ecclesiastical interest, and was again rebuked and dismissed.

On his return to Ireland in 1845, O'Malley started a newspaper, *The Social Economist*, and in a public debate with O'Connell, argued the comparative advantages of federalism and Repeal. In support of his views he started another paper *The Federalist*, and

endeavoured to unite the Young Ireland and O'Connell parties. Failing, he retired from public life, lived alone in a back lane in Dublin and was not heard of for close on twenty years.

However, when Isaac Butt started the Home Rule movement in 1870, O'Malley recovered, and with voice and pen zealously supported Butt's policy, which was nothing more or less than the one which O'Malley advocated thirty years previously. But O'Malley again got into trouble with his superiors. He wrote a book entitled *Harmony in Religion*, advocating certain reforms in the Catholic Church, published it anonymously, and incurred the censure of Cardinal Cullen, then Archbishop of Dublin. In 1873 he wrote a pamphlet *Home Rule on the Basis of Federalism*, which went into several editions.

He died at his humble lodgings in Henrietta Street, Dublin, on 2nd January, 1877, aged 81 years, and was buried in Glasnevin Cemetery. Of this stormy petrel of politics and religion it has been said that although "bold in urging ecclesiastical reform, he was unswerving on articles of faith ... an honest man, a gentleman, and a scholar, he was greatly beloved by a large circle of friends".

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Labour, Nationality and Religion in Nineteenth Century Ireland:

The case of Thaddeus O'Malley

In 1848, three days before the last great Chartist demonstration in London on 10 April, and three months before the abortive Irish rising at Ballingarry on 22-23 July, a gathering of workers and citizens of Dublin heard a Limerick Catholic priest, Thaddeus O'Malley, call upon working men to look to France. There the workers of Paris had bravely fought for their interests and had established the rights of labour. He went on to add that they were not, as in Ireland, exclusively Catholics and Protestants, but numbered many Jews and unbelievers as well; yet, regardless of their differences about the world of spirits they stood firmly together, 'comrades and brothers all'.⁽¹⁾ He then called upon the workers, Protestant and Catholic alike, to take a decisive part in the great movement for the establishment of a government in this country. He reminded the Protestant and Catholic workers of Ireland of the long and weary years they had spent in vain agitation. When challenged by a member of the audience that the struggle for Catholic Emancipation had not been in vain he responded:

Ay, Catholic Emancipation - what had it done for them?

by Fergus D'Arcy

It helped pitch into parliament some dozen respectable Catholics who took good care to provide themselves with places. Thus it had ever been with the people - they had always been used by their leaders for their leaders' own benefit.⁽²⁾

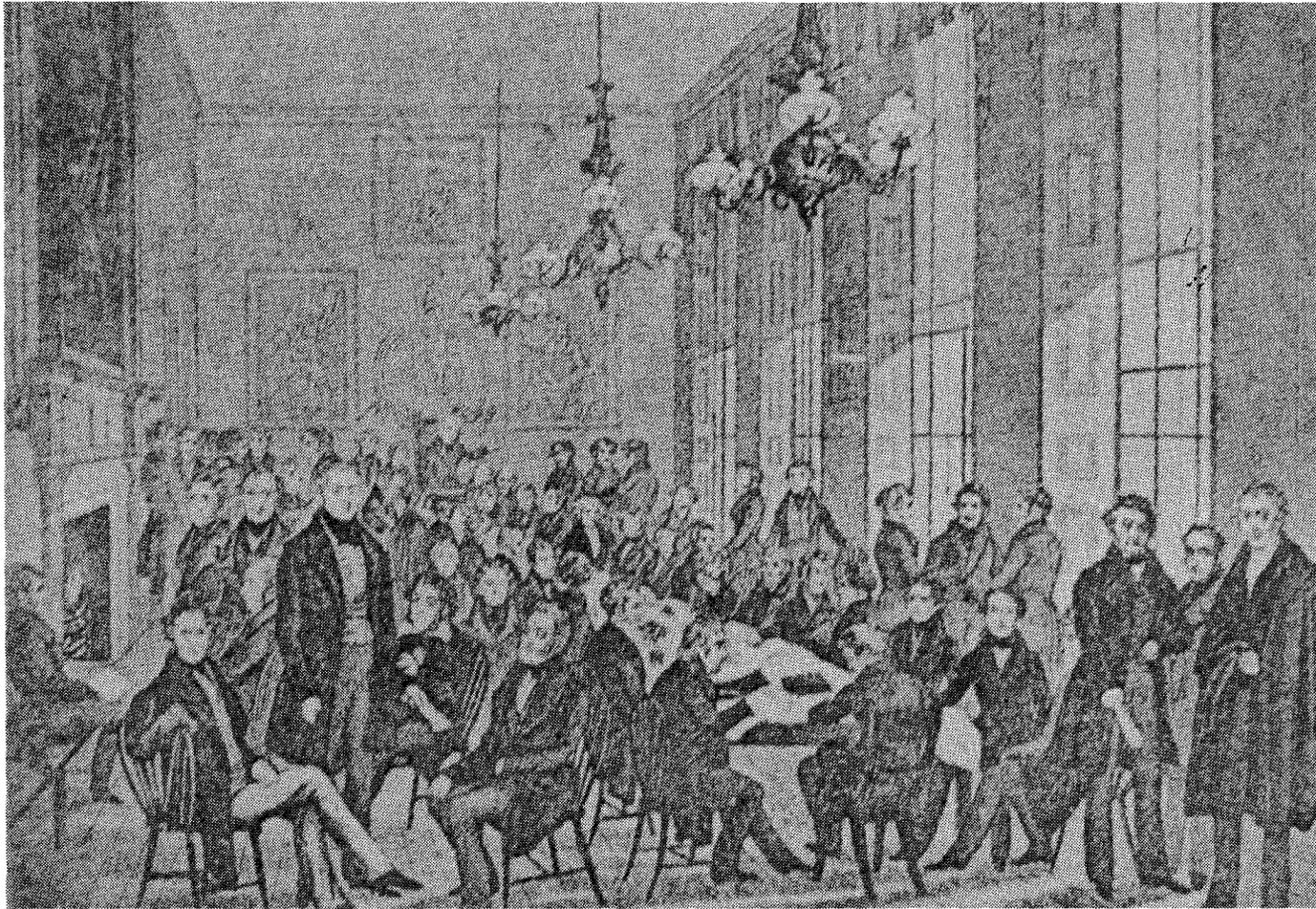
He concluded by calling on them to reverse that order of things.

O'Malley's forthright speech did not come out of the blue. Already on 7 March, 1848, he had written a letter on *The Rights of Labour*, published in the press three days later. In this he referred to a Workman's Bill of Rights which he had drafted and wished to see endorsed by an Irish parliament. This Bill aimed to secure justice for all labour, skilled and unskilled, male and female, rural and domestic.⁽³⁾

While his April speech, professing admiration for the French workers, had not explicitly called on Irish workers to take up arms, O'Malley himself appears to have become caught up in the rapidly radicalising situation that developed between then and Smith O'Brien's abortive rising in July, 1848. In June, at a

meeting in the Music Hall, Abbey Street, he came as close to calling for a revolution as one could do - he urged the continued growth of Confederate Clubs and would form one himself for the poor: one police report to the Castle had him stating the right of all to have arms and when a government acted with brute force it was only right to give it a strong dose of the same physic. Another police informant at the same meeting reported that "priest O'Malley rose and made a long winded and determined speech telling the people they would get nothing but what they fight for and win and he called on the people above all to arm."⁽⁴⁾ This was on 21 June: two days later the Paris workers, however armed, felt what it was like to take on the state and the middle classes and to lose when they were slaughtered in the streets of Paris.

What happened to O'Malley in the immediate wake of the June days in Paris and the fiasco at Ballingarry in July is unclear. But he was to renew his public identification with the cause of labour three years later in a rather particular way. Before discussing this it might be useful to offer some background on this unusual cleric whose views, arguments and activities should be of interest to students of Irish history in general and to those



The Chartists' National Convention, held at the British Coffee House, London, 4 February, 1839.

interested in particular in the conjunction of labour, nationality and religion in Ireland from the nineteenth century. Beyond two brief and inaccurate entries in biographical dictionaries in the later part of the last century and in the earlier part of this, he has not been the subject of any published study.⁽⁶⁾

At the time of his *Rights of Labour* letter in 1848 O'Malley, at 52 years of age, was already well known in the world of the working class and social politics. He was born in Garryowen in Limerick in 1796 and was ordained to the priesthood in 1819 at 23 years of age. After a formative period in the United States, he returned to Dublin in 1825 as a curate in Daniel Murray's Pro-Cathedral.⁽⁶⁾ He soon became involved in public controversy on the questions of national education and poor law. But the most remarkable and little known fact about the O'Malley of these years is that he was almost certainly the first man in modern Irish history to advocate a Federal solution to the Anglo-Irish dilemma. That he was active in the Federalist episode in the history of the Repeal Association in 1843-44 is known; that he was the editor of a journal called *The Federalist* in the period 1871-1874 in support of Isaac Butt's Home Rule movement is also well known. That Butt should have acknowledged him as the Father of Federalism in Ireland is fact⁽⁷⁾ – but a curious one until it is realised that already from January, 1831, he began the first number of his paper *The Federalist*.⁽⁸⁾ Its subtitle was *A series of papers showing*

how to Repeal the Union so as to avoid a violent crisis and at the same time, secure and reconcile all interests.

In it he laid down the principles that guided most of his public life thereafter – and one of the central ones was that of reconciling Orange and Green and of accommodating the interests of Protestant and Catholic Ireland. Space does not permit a detailed exegesis of his view of the inadequacy of simple Repeal versus Union – but, briefly, the simple repeal of Daniel O'Connell's political campaigns would be a recipe for conflict between two sovereign legislatures and also could lead to a Catholic faction's hegemony. O'Malley's American experience convinced him of the superior harmony of a federal system. It probably was critical also in his insistence that a prerequisite to prevent a Catholic ascendancy in a new Ireland was “the complete and absolute divorce of the connexion between the Irish Church and the Irish State”. He proposed the abolition of tithes, of the state grant to the Presbyterians, known as the *Regium Donum* and also of the state grant to St. Patrick's College, Maynooth. He added that since it was the parliament which originally had appropriated church lands during the Reformation it still had the power to reappropriate them.⁽⁹⁾

He first gave serious thought to Federalism, during the Catholic Emancipation struggle which he regarded as “squandering energies upon a partial sectarian question”.⁽¹⁰⁾ He would insist that an “Irish parliament would have no power

touching the establishment of religion”. He advocated separate legislatures for England and Ireland but with a separate imperial legislature composed of representatives from these separate legislatures.⁽¹¹⁾

It was as early as 1831, within the pages of *The Federalist*, that he first suggested the necessity of a national system of poor relief, funded in part by the transfer of tithe income and funded in part from progressive taxation. His social radicalism was here first evident in his remark that he was “of such homely politics as to prefer that the rich should be deprived of some of their luxuries or even the middle classes of some of their comforts rather than that the poor should be debarred from the necessaries”.⁽¹²⁾ His assertion of this anticipated the major conflict that arose between himself and Daniel O'Connell in 1837 which placed him strongly on the side of the workers and poor and O'Connell on the side of property. Again in 1831 he insisted that poor relief was not a question of moral obligation as O'Connell and Bishop Doyle of Kildare had suggested but one of right. His incipient Christian socialism came out in his remark at this point that until the lessons of the Gospel in reference to the relations of rich and poor are adopted as the preambles to our Christian legislation, Christianity shall have failed of its purpose. He condemned O'Connell for saying charity was the solution to unequal distribution: *I'm talking of rights, not charity.* To deny the right of the poor to a



'Attack on a potato store', from the *Illustrated London News*.

poor law was to absolve the poor "from whatever moral allegiance they owe to the laws of property".

These sentiments, radical enough in 1831 by any Irish standards, let alone those of a Catholic priest of the Pro-Cathedral, were to be elaborated at great length six years later in O'Malley's pamphlet *A Plan of a Poor Law for Ireland*. At the time of its serial publication over the winter of 1836-1837, O'Malley had become a member of O'Connell's General Association which he hoped would become the embryo of an Irish parliament. Seeking to move a series of resolutions embodying his concept of poor relief brought him into headlong collision with O'Connell in the public forum. That division won O'Malley an extensive notice by and support from radicals in Britain as well as workers in Ireland.⁽¹³⁾ It brought out the fundamentally conflicting social philosophies of O'Connell's liberalism and O'Malley's collectivism. O'Connell's denial of any right of the poor to relief and his quite explicit support for the pre-eminent rights of property undoubtedly paved the way for the bitter conflict with the trade unions of Ireland which followed a few months later. Equally it prepared O'Malley for the advance in his views which came a few years later when he delivered his *Address to Mechanics, Small Farmers and the Working Classes Generally*. Published in 1845, the address was actually delivered in 1844 in the Carpenters' Asylum, Gloucester Street. The date is interesting in the light of its contents. Basically it is a manifesto for co-operation as a salvation for the working classes and is based on the same principles as the Rochdale Pioneers were just then establishing.

Space does not permit a detailed exposition of this work in the socialist tradition. It shows the author familiar with

the theories of Spence, Owen St. Simon and Fourier and is the first and only publication in Irish history before 1850 in my awareness that adverts to these major figures. That it should have been a theologically orthodox Limerick priest who introduced the working class of Dublin to these theories, if only to reject them, is in itself of some interest. The context of the publication of his theory of social salvation by way of family association or community purchase of goods and communal living, was one in which the Dublin working class was organising itself into the Regular Trades' Association – was beginning to articulate a language of the rights of labour and was pressing for a legislative protection against the rampages of an unbridled capitalism and industrialism. Since these workers themselves left few written records behind them we have no means of knowing how much influence O'Malley's pamphlet aroused among them, but there can be no question that he contributed something, and perhaps something considerable, to that growing articulation.

As the Famine descended upon the country and indeed affected the towns and capital as well, there was little scope for social engineering in the midst of economic catastrophe and it may well be that one of its effects was to have driven O'Malley to the extreme position the police appear to have discovered him in as a supporter of the Confederation. What part he may have played in the attempt to forge a Confederation-Chartist alliance in 1848 is not yet clear, though one source has him being elected Chartist delegate for Nottingham to the third Convention in 1848.⁽¹⁴⁾

Some silence descends, after 1848, for three years. Then there appears for at least six numbers, in November and

December, 1851, a Dublin newspaper called *The Christian Social Economist*, with O'Malley as founder, editor and main contributor. Copies have survived in the British Library collection and reveal the only Christian socialist journal produced in Ireland in the entirety of the last century.

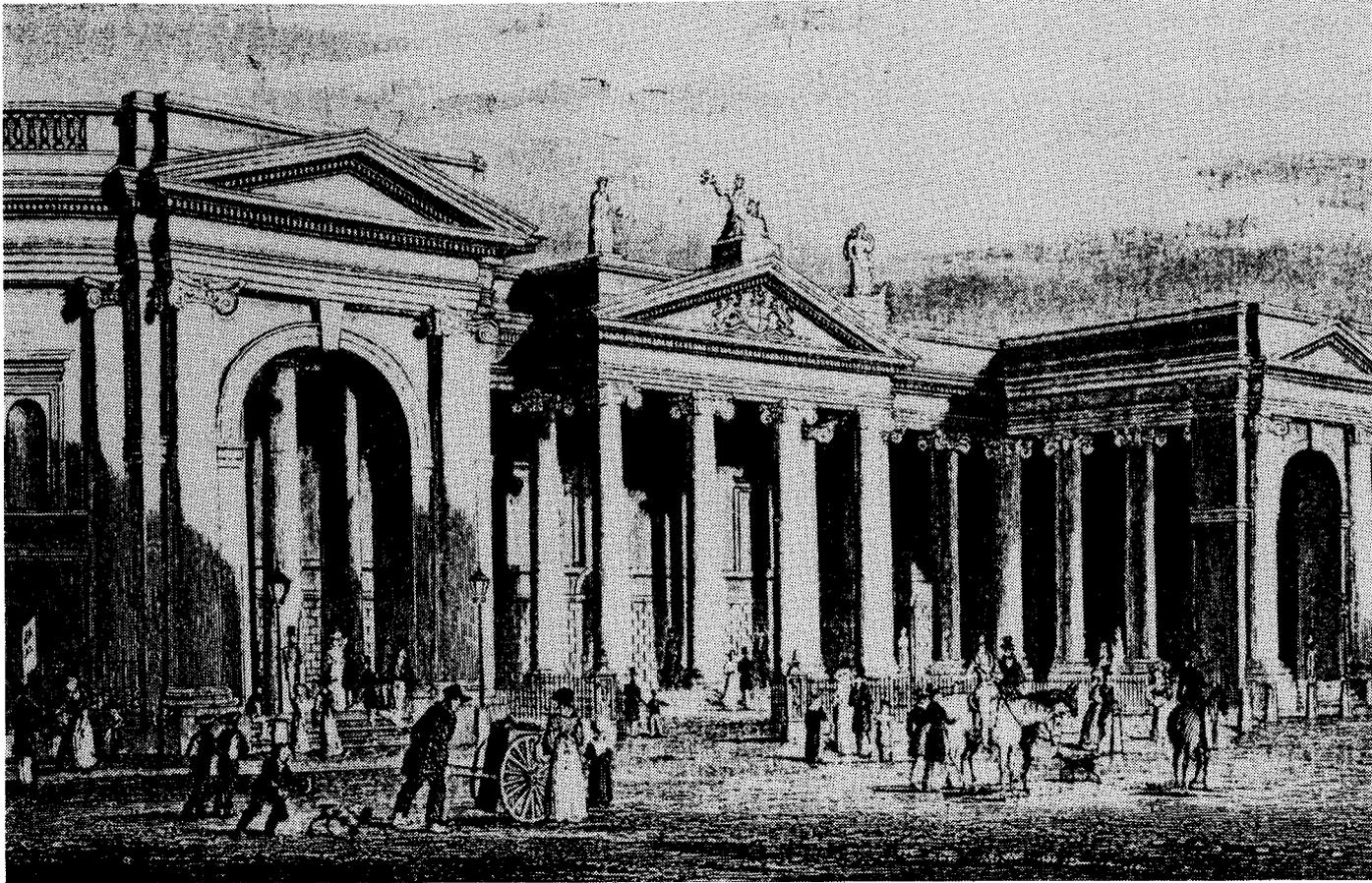
One does not wish to overstate its socialism: it is very much the socialism of Frederick Denison Maurice and John Malcolm Ludlow, though without Maurice's theological complexity. Nevertheless, its mere existence points to possibilities in Irish society that were available but not availed of.

In setting out his 'mission' O'Malley identified sectarian religious strife as the primary woe and the religious press as a primary source of it. Equal rights for all was his alternative to it; he insisted that the cordial co-operation of the clergy of all classes was essential to achieving an effective amelioration "of the condition of the masses". Specifically he wanted a universal industrial education and a radical amendment of the useless poor law. He wanted to prevent the influence of a godless socialism upon the poor and to provide a practicable alternative. He insists on the solidarity, not of the working class, but of the interests of all classes.

Elsewhere in his first issue he wrote on socialism and how it had been disfigured by its charlatans.

Defining socialism in the sense of a large programme of practical reforms designed to improve greatly the social condition of the masses he added "in this sense it is to be hoped that we are all socialists". He also defined it as that working class movement of co-operative development such as he had outlined in his 1844 address. Thirdly, there was the socialism which aspired to be a science which he deplored for the reckless audacity of its logic.⁽¹⁵⁾ He insisted on the need for a Christian social philosophy – a Christian socialism – to posit against the "atrocious political philosophy of the time which sacrificed hundreds of thousands of human victims". He urged the infusion into society of the practical social morality of the Gospel as in the work of Thomas Arnold of Rugby.

Later issues of the journal called for legislative protection against summary unfair dismissals from work and a reform of the Poor Law system. Here he recalled his early support for a poor law for Ireland, deplored the defects of the system as actually introduced in 1838 "under the thralldom of certain unproved dogmas of the political economists". He insisted that it was a right, not a charity: since society currently allowed or recognised the right of accumulation, its inevitable correlative was destitution. He insisted that as a law of security of life a poor law ought to be as peremptory and important as the law of security of property. He further insisted that poor rate should be a national not a local levy and that the system should cease to punish the deserving and cease to defraud the poor of their rights.



The Houses of Parliament, College Green, Dublin.

In a separate and final surviving issue, on 27 December, he took up again the theme of federalism, arguing that Irish nationality and the British connection were not incompatible. He used the example of the Scots of whom there was no people in the world so alive to feelings of nationality yet no less attached to the British connection. He now urged the institution of English, Scottish and Irish parliaments and a High Imperial Parliament to deal with the international and colonial affairs of the three kingdoms.⁽¹⁶⁾

Unfortunately for O'Malley, and perhaps for Ireland and its working people, the paper did not secure the support necessary to sustain its costs. Its failure appears to have silenced the radical priest for almost a decade and a half. In the middle of the 1860s he issued a third edition of his pamphlet *Tithe Rent, A Poor Rate, Radical Poor Law Reform*. If anything, while the characteristic theme remained unchanged, the tone was more radical still: he asked his readers to contrast what the legislature does for "the security of property in favour of the upper ten thousand with what it does for securing the existence of the humbler masses". In what was probably the first ever use of the word in Irish political discourse, he remarked of government that "the right to live of the *proletaire* it surrenders to the discretion of some halfdozen gentlemen (so called) 'guardians of the poor' who may too often be more truly called the guardians of their own pockets".

When at the end of the 1860s the Home Rule movement began to gather pace O'Malley re-emerged to give it the support of its endorsement of his own original position. It was typical of him that when he came now to promote the cause again it was for him inextricably linked to the cause of labour: speaking in Soho, London, in his 76th year, in the winter of 1872, as far as he was concerned the object of Home Rule was the greater happiness for the greater number: "labour and the dignity of labour is the question of the day".⁽¹⁷⁾

Two years later he published the third edition of the substantial pamphlet *Home Rule on the Basis of Federalism* in which, incidentally, he urged that there should be a minister of labour in the national cabinets of the three kingdoms in a new federal system. It further urged the legislative institution of courts of arbitration, with representatives of workers, employers and independent assessors. His work concluded with a plea to Fenians and Orangemen to drop their animosities and work together for the goal of a federal island.

Five years later he died and has been little remembered since. Yet his public life should serve to remind us that there was an alternative possible history for Ireland and for Irish labour in the nineteenth century. That it was a path not followed, however, was clearly due to the stronger attractions of the great and destructive dual carriageways of Irish nationalism and unionism which carried all before them in the end – labour included.⁽¹⁸⁾

SOURCES

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2. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid.*, 10 March, 1848.
4. T.C.D., Ms S.3.5., ff.11-16, *Police Reports of Confederate Clubs*, 21 June, 1848.
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6. P. Guilday, *The life and times of John England, 1786-1842*, 2 vols, New York, 1927, i.421.
7. Webb, *op. cit.*
8. R.I.A., Haliday Tracts, vol. 1525, Year 1831, *The Federalist*.
9. *The Federalist*, No. 3, p. 85.
10. *Ibid.*, No. 1, January, 1831, p. 30.
11. *Ibid.*, No. 2, p. 75.
12. *Ibid.*, No. 3, pp. 111-112.
13. *The Pilot*, 9 Jan., 15 Feb., 1837, reporting comments of the 'Radicals of Hull' and the 'Reformers of Bath', for example.
14. J. Hickey, *Urban Catholics: Urban Catholicism in England and Wales from 1820 to the present day*, London, 1967, p. 148, citing H.U. Faulkner, 'Chartism and the Churches', in F.F. Rosenblatt, *The Social and Economic Aspects of the Chartist Movement*, New York, 1916.
15. *The Christian Social Economist*, 22 Nov., 1851. Webb and Crone misdate the appearance of this journal, and place its appearance in 1845.
16. *Ibid.*, 27 Dec., 1851.
17. *Flag of Ireland*, 21 Dec., 1872.
18. The author is currently preparing a biography of Thaddeus O'Malley.