

BOOK REVIEW:

The Great Famine, Studies in Irish History, 1845-52, edited by R. Dudley Edwards, and T. Desmond Williams, published by the Irish Committee of Historical Sciences. Browne and Nolan Ltd., Dublin, 1956

The Great Famine

by G. Kitson Clark

This is a valuable and admirable book: valuable, in particular, for the same reason that it is admirable. The great famine is, as we all know, a memory of great bitterness with the Irish, and a potential source of hatred against England and the English. And no wonder. In the famine years Ireland probably lost about two million of her population; many dying in utter misery, others flying to foreign lands, having lost everything. It was certainly mismanaged by the British Government. Too little relief was provided; it was provided in the wrong ways; it was, except at the very beginning, always too slow and too late; emigration was not adequately controlled or assisted; no adequate attempt was made to grapple with the evil social conditions which were part cause of the trouble. It is easy enough to move from a reflection on these facts to a belief in the actual malignancy of the English, to a belief that they actually desired that Irishmen should die, or, at the best, were impenetrably callous as to whether they died or not. And that legend has prevailed since then with many Irishmen.

I think it is not unfair to say that in this book this dreadful legend in its old crude form disappears. The authors are Irishmen; they clearly and rightly feel very strongly about the catastrophe which their forefathers suffered, but they remain faithful to the exacting demands of the ideal of objective scholarship. They do not minimize the extent to which the miserable past history of the relations between England and Ireland had prepared the way for the tragedy - how far it had been responsible for the bad conditions of Ireland, for the domestic hostilities, for the intolerable system of land tenure, for the unnatural relationship between landlord and tenant. They also show clearly enough those factors in the existing system of government which helped to make things worse - the remoteness of the government in London, its consequent ignorance and lack of a sense of urgency, the over-great influence in British politics of landlords, Irish and English, with as a result an excessive respect for the rights of property, and the tendency to use methods and principles which might be suitable for England but were worse than hopeless in Ireland. But they are prepared to acknowledge the good intentions of men entangled in the evil web of the past, which was after all not of their spinning. They also, I think, make it clear how difficult it was for an early 19th century government, guided only by the inappropriate ideas of their time, equipped only by its inadequate machinery, to handle successfully so gigantic a catastrophe, whose proportions they only gradually learnt, whose causes they could not understand and whose course they could not predict.

To confront old and bitter legend with objective scholarship and critical judgment is one of the hardest, as it is one of the most useful, tasks of a historian; but in history moral responsibility is not everything, we want to know how things happened and why things happened. To these questions this book makes a very valuable contribution. It does not to my mind cover the whole ground as completely as it might have done, in fact I believe three more studies could with advantage have been added to the book. First, I think there should have been a separate chapter on the national movement before the famine. Dr. MacDowell's account of Ireland on the eve of the famine is an unusually comprehensive account of Irish life written from very full knowledge, but because it is so comprehensive, it does not emphasize enough the peculiar importance of the movement led by O'Connell or give an idea of its full force and significance. Yet both for Englishmen and Irishmen that movement occupied the very centre of the picture and an understanding of it is necessary to prepare for the account by Dr. Nowlan of politics, English and Irish, during the famine, which is one of the keys of the whole book. Secondly, we need more on

emigration. While Dr. MacDonagh tells us much that is interesting and important about emigration to Canada, the United States and Australia, he tells us little or nothing about Irish immigration into England and Scotland, which were probably the most important reception areas. Such immigration would, no doubt, be difficult to trace, but any account of the famine without discussion of it seems strangely incomplete.

The third omission is more serious. From a sociological and economic point of view there is a useful account of Irish agriculture before, and at the time of, the famine by Mr. Green, and a deeply interesting account of the medical history by Sir William MacArthur. There is, however, no directly demographical study, specifically on the rise, distribution and decline of the Irish population. But this is the centre of the whole problem! The immediate cause of the famine was the development of a large population in Ireland subsisting in miserable conditions very largely on the produce of a single crop. When that failed, they had to go or die; how then, had they come to exist in such circumstances, in such numbers? It is to be admitted that this matter presents some very intractable questions; for I think it is true to say that no one yet knows the cause of so tragic a rise in the numbers of a population on the very margin of subsistence. Mr. K.A. Connell has done excellent work upon it, but his results are criticised, indeed he has criticised them himself; nevertheless, until we get nearer the heart of that problem we shall never understand the full significance of the Irish famine. We also need to know how the population was distributed in Ireland before the famine, and whether that distribution was permanently changed when the famine was over.

It would, however, be churlish to criticise the good things we have for the lack of what we do not yet possess; perhaps in due course these scholars, or others, will supply these deficiencies. To me, and I think to others, the most interesting problem in the book as it now stands is that presented by the failures of the British Government, on which the chapter by Dr. Nowlan and that by Mr. O'Neill on famine relief throw a very revealing light.

One cause of this failure seems to stand out very clearly; it was the diversion in 1845 of the energies of the Conservative Prime Minister into the predominantly English controversy over the repeal of the Corn Laws, and his consequent fall from office. In describing this diversion I do not think Mr. O'Neill is quite just. He seems to suggest that Peel used the Irish famine as an excuse for putting through a policy on which he was otherwise determined for reasons unconnected with Ireland. Now I have read, I think, all the published material on this point, and very many unpublished letters between Peel and his colleagues, and I do not think that this is a really fair way to think of it.

What I believe to have happened was this. Before the news of the potato blight came in 1845 Peel had developed no fiscal plans for 1846; indeed he and his colleagues had been thinking of something quite different, of some long-forgotten problems of national defence which seemed at that moment to be urgent. Peel realised the significance of the news remarkably early, and set about with commendable vigour and his accustomed ability to investigate matters and organise measures of relief. Indeed, he came to be absorbed in the matter with a passionate intensity which the duke of Wellington subsequently described to J.W. Croker with the strong word "agony". What the Duke says is worth noting. "I cannot doubt that which passed under my own view and frequent observation day after day. I mean the alarms of the consequences



Portrait of Thomas Spring Rice by Sir Martin Shee, commissioned by the Limerick Chamber of Commerce, and hung in 1822.

in Ireland of the potato disease. I never witnessed in any case such agony". The Duke in his time had witnessed much, and I think he provides good evidence. He was a careful, rather literal-minded observer, not given to exaggeration, and in this case he was providing information about something which he knew well - I think he called on Peel every day when they were both in office and in town - information which his correspondent did not want; for Croker wished to suggest that Peel had not been sincere about the famine, yet the diversion took place. Unfortunately, as he considered his problem, Peel became soon convinced that he could not do what was necessary, plan relief works, attract food into Ireland etc., while the grain that was needed to feed the people, Irish as well as English, paid duty on entry, and he felt clear that, once suspended, the Corn Laws would never be re-imposed. No doubt this conviction was influenced and its corollary wholly imposed by memories of English controversy on English issues, but I am quite sure he was driven to his decision at that moment by the needs of the famine and by nothing else.

The results were disastrous. The attention of everyone was diverted into a first class, and quite irrelevant, political dog-fight over the repeal of the Corn Laws. What was much worse, Peel was driven out of office at the most critical moment, in June, 1846, when the famine seemed to be coming to an end and before the renewed onslaught of the disease that winter was disclosed. His government was replaced by the much less efficient government of the Whigs, under the leadership of Lord John Russell, a leader from whom all power of effective decision seems to have departed. All momentum was lost. Essential measures were abandoned, the Treasury officials got out of hand and the Cabinet drifted inconclusively into the fatal year, 1847. Peel had dealt with the famine, while he was responsible, reasonably successfully; it was said that no one died while he was Prime Minister: but, of course, the problem with which he had to deal was very small when compared with that which soon confronted the Whigs. Nevertheless a consideration of the workings of both governments suggests how disastrous was the change when Lord John Russell replaced that iron master of Cabinet ministers and civil servants, that man of normally concealed but vehement feelings, Sir Robert Peel.

There is, however, something else to consider. Operating on both governments, and impeding them, were certain most unfortunate preconceptions and principles. Peel shared these preconceptions, but they hampered him less, when in office, than they did the Whigs, since he had the stronger will and more powerfully concentrated emotions. It is, after all, over lesser man that the commonplace of economic orthodoxy and official routine have correspondingly the greater hold. Nevertheless these preconceptions were natural to any English statesman at that time; for they were deeply grounded in the philosophy and traditions of English political life; and it is important to realise what they were.

In the first place there was the belief that in general a district must pay for its own local needs, particularly for its own poor. This principle is probably medieval in origin, but it was the basis of the English system of local government and of local rates. Though from 1835 onwards it was being very cautiously modified in certain particulars by the device of the grant in aid, it was still normally assumed, and was to be so for a long period. Secondly, there was the profound conviction that money from the National Exchequer must be spent as grudgingly as possible and would certainly be fraudulently wasted unless its issue was subjected to very meticulous and therefore often very, very slow and very pedantic controls. Behind this there was much history, the struggle of the House of Commons to control the appropriation of its votes, the struggle against the aristocratic corruptions of the 18th century which was still being waged in the 19th century, at least in the minds of captious Parliamentary critics. More than this, in the ethical climate of the 19th century, official meanness was exalted almost into a precept of morality, as if "thou shalt not spend other people's money too generously, if it must be spent" was a natural gloss which any conscientious man would add to the eighth Commandment. Then, thirdly, there was the more modern philosophy which taught that nothing would go well unless the state left as much as possible to the private enterprise of the private capitalist or merchant and the self reliance of the individual workman, and that if men and women had to be relieved, it must be done on such terms as to encourage them to rely as soon as possible, and always as much as possible, on their own efforts.

None of these principles are fashionable now, but they are not indefensible. Indeed, they combine to make a robust philosophy which may be more suitable than we think for healthy people in a healthy, and expanding, economy. But for dying and destitute people, in an economy which offered no attractions to the enterprise of the private investor, they were tragically, horribly, inapposite. They meant that the government was slow and niggard where it should have been quick and generous, lent where it should have given, imposed badly conceived, badly managed labour tests on people who were past labour, and tried to maintain an open market in corn where strict control, state purchase and direct relief were the only humane policies. In fact, one diagnosis of what went wrong might be the persistent and recurring attempt to apply to stricken Ireland principles which were well suited to healthy England.

But were these principles always so well suited to everything in England? The whole history of de-rating raises the problem of the

propriety of resting too heavy responsibilities on industries and districts already depressed. Nor were the results of English administration for all sorts and conditions of men in England always of the happiest. In the years immediately before the famine, the English newspapers are full of the scandals of what had happened in certain English workhouses. They are not on the scale of the Irish famine, but they are sufficiently horrible and they are a standing testimony to the potential cruelty of the workhouse test and to the incapacity of the administration to control the houses in which paupers were tested. The same system and the same administration had been transferred to Ireland; it was put to greater strain during the famine and failed more conspicuously, but it was not intrinsically worse. The famine is closely followed by the Crimean War and the terrible winter of 1854-5 when, through maladministration, the British lost an army of which they were very proud before Sebastopol. A study of the experiences of Florence Nightingale, or such records as the report of the Roebuck Committee, or the results of the inquiry of Sir John MacNeill and Colonel Tulloch, seems to suggest much similarity here with some of the things that happened in the famine. There is the same official niggardliness and tight exchequer control which fatally delayed the provision of fodder necessary to keep alive the transport animals which had to carry food and supplies to the troops, the same official pedantry which prevented the issue of overcoats to men shivering in the trenches, or produced interminable delays in the release of desperately needed medical stores for the hospitals at Scutari. In fact, the suggestion might be hazarded that men died unpaid on public works in Ireland or in the frozen mud in Russia for much the same reasons. Eleven years later still there was an outbreak of cattle plague in the English counties and its process fully demonstrated again how unsuited was the liberal policy of non-interference, and the habits of Whig insouciance in this case exemplified by Sir George Grey, the very apathetic Home Secretary, to deal with a sudden serious agricultural epidemic. The conclusion might seem to be that the British system was the result of a long historic process; it had suited and still suited certain purposes very well, but that there is ample evidence that its principles and methods could not compass much that the simplest humanity, or the most desperate need, demanded, for Irishmen or for Englishmen. It had to learn how to supply these deficiencies by trial and error, only the trial was long and the errors very dreadful indeed.

To this reflection must be added a realization of the full difficulty of the situation which confronted the British government in the potato famine. It is a salutary exercise to consider yourself in the position of the government of Lord John Russell in 1847 and

then to try to think out what you would have done for Ireland; or rather it is a salutary exercise, if you remember certain things. For you must remember how little you knew about what is going to happen, or what is happening, how little you know about the disease that has destroyed the potatoes, or the diseases which are destroying the people of Ireland; for the interesting medical facts in Sir William MacArthur's article were not even guessed for many years afterwards. You must remember how inadequate to meet this gigantic catastrophe is the government machinery at your disposal and that any effective remedial measure must inevitably mean drawing deeply on the pocket of the English taxpayer. You must also remember that any effective remedy must also probably mean that, whatever you do about land tenure, a large number of people must in all probability leave Ireland, if they are to be able to live such lives as ought to be lived by men and women.

However, none of this exonerates that government. If they had only put into effect such schemes as Lord John Russell and his colleagues fitfully considered, and as fitfully abandoned, perhaps if they had only listened to Lord George Bentinck, much might have been saved. Even if they had only spent such money, as in the result they did spend, more effectively, more sympathetically and with fewer delays, they would have saved lives and avoided causes for hatred. But they failed, and their failures, as fairly revealed in this book, teach us much that is important about the history of Ireland and of England as well.

Indeed, I think they teach us something about all history and about the whole human condition. Even among Englishmen there was, I believe, at this time much good intention, much generosity and a sense of responsibility. Now ordinary good intentions and ordinary generosity, ordinary principles and the limited sense of responsibility which the normal man believes to be adequate for the usual business of life may possibly be good enough for ordinary circumstances, but there are extraordinary circumstances when they do not suffice, particularly, perhaps, circumstances bedevilled by the results of ancient wrong, or when a man's thought ought to transcend the limitations and conceptions his historic situation has provided for him. Something more is needed, a more passionate sense of personal obligation, a wider range of feeling. It might perhaps, with better fortune, in this case have come from the "agony" of Sir Robert Peel: it did come from the Society of Friends. But there were not enough Englishmen who were prepared to supply it, and that I am afraid is normally true of most races at most periods. It is a sombre lesson, but one which it is well worth pondering, and if for nothing else I would be grateful to this important, if sombre book, because it drives it home. (Reprinted from *University Review*, Vol. 1, No. 10, 1957).

From A Chant for Irishmen, befitting the times

by Thomas Dillon

All hail! to the Dame with the diademed brow,
Who comes like an angel to visit us now,
What kind condescension! - what goodness! what grace!
To show us the light of her right royal face.

She comes when the country is glorious to see -
The seed in the earth, and the fruit on the tree -
She comes when the corn is ripe in the ear,
And hope cheers the heart of the rough mountaineer.

Yet, Death at her coming a banquet has spread,
And the tears of the widow and orphan are shed;
She comes when her last felon transport departs,
With her last martial law still like ice at our hearts.

But she comes, and she'll visit 'the Causeway' and 'lakes,'
And put on a green poplin dress for our sakes;
The shamrock she's cull from our famine filled graves,
And graciously smile back the smiling of slaves.

And Saxon and Celt will no longer be foes,
And both will put on their best holiday clothes;
And serfs will come bending the neck and the knee,
To worship the court of her great Majesty.

And bells will ring out all their joy on the air,
And lights will make lurid the night with their glare;
And men from their hovels, 'mid mountains and crags,
Will come forth, forgetting their hunger and rags.

And chargers will prance in the foam of their might,
And men will look mighty in scarlet bedight;
And stars will blaze brightly, and ribbons will flaunt,
To keep in the distance the shadows of want.

And we shall be told that the Queen of the Isles,
Has come 'mong her people with blessings and smiles;
And how she loves dearly the land of the green,
And grieves at our grief as becometh a Queen.

(The Limerick Reporter, Friday, 27 July, 1849).