

The Great Irish Famine, 1845-1852

by Thomas P. O'Neill

The social and economic condition of the bulk of the population of Ireland in the decades preceding the famine of the mid-nineteenth century had reached the nadir. The general apathy of the landlords as a body contributed to the declining standards of living. Riotous living by an earlier generation had resulted in impoverishment, and mortgages on property raised a prohibitive barrier against the owners making any provision for assisting their tenants. The incubus of poverty overshadowed the system of land tenure, and lack of capital was the main obstacle in the way of those landowners, mainly resident in Ireland, who were interested in the development of their estates. Absentees were usually too far removed from the distress of their tenantry to take an interest in anything but the regular collection of rent, and absenteeism had been increased by the Act of Union which had removed the hub of Irish political life from College Green to Westminster.

The phenomenal increase in the population of Ireland during the first half of the century, coupled with a static rate of food production, contributed largely to the decline in the social standard. In one feature, in particular, did the social economy of the Irish labourer add to the difficulties which arose with the failure of the potato - in that money was seldom used as a medium of exchange.⁽¹⁾ Usually the farmer kept an account book in which the labourer's earnings were balanced against the rent of a piece of potato ground. Thus money was a measure rather than a medium of exchange, except in the case of those who migrated seasonally for spring and harvest work to other parts of Ireland or to England or Scotland.⁽²⁾ These migratory labourers paid in cash for their potato ground and lived, as did the ordinary labourer, on the produce of the plot. The dependence of a large proportion of the population on the potato and the fact that in normal years these people were living only slightly above starvation level meant that, in years in which the potato crop did not reach the average yield, a crisis in the food situation developed. This had occurred in 1817, 1822, 1836, 1839 and 1842,⁽³⁾ and it was generally recognised that Ireland was heading towards catastrophe.

One way in which the worsening of the situation might have been prevented was



Sir Robert Peel, a mezzotint engraved by William Ward, after a portrait by John Wood.

by government interference and the encouragement of drainage, subsoiling and such salutary improvements by laws and grants. No government, however, could have been expected to improve a landowner's property when the landlords as a body had failed to help themselves. To develop their property by grants would have been equivalent to giving presents to people who had wasted their substance, and to assist them by loans would have

resulted in swamping already heavily mortgaged estates. The only real cure for the situation lay in the reform of land tenure by ridding landlords of encumbrances so that they could improve their estates or, if this was insufficient, by giving tenants security in their holdings. This, however, savoured too much of interference with the rights of property to commend itself to pre-famine legislators, among whom the current economic



A doctor visits a dying man at Scull. Engraving, *Illustrated London News*, 20 February, 1847.

not provided for by the government. These bodies collected subscriptions from local proprietors and received donations from the government in proportion to the subscriptions. A central board of health was also established, as an outbreak of fever was apprehended as a consequence of scarcity. The success which attended these measures was admitted by people of all shades of opinion at the time,⁽⁶⁾ and, though a couple of deaths by starvation occurred, famine was averted.

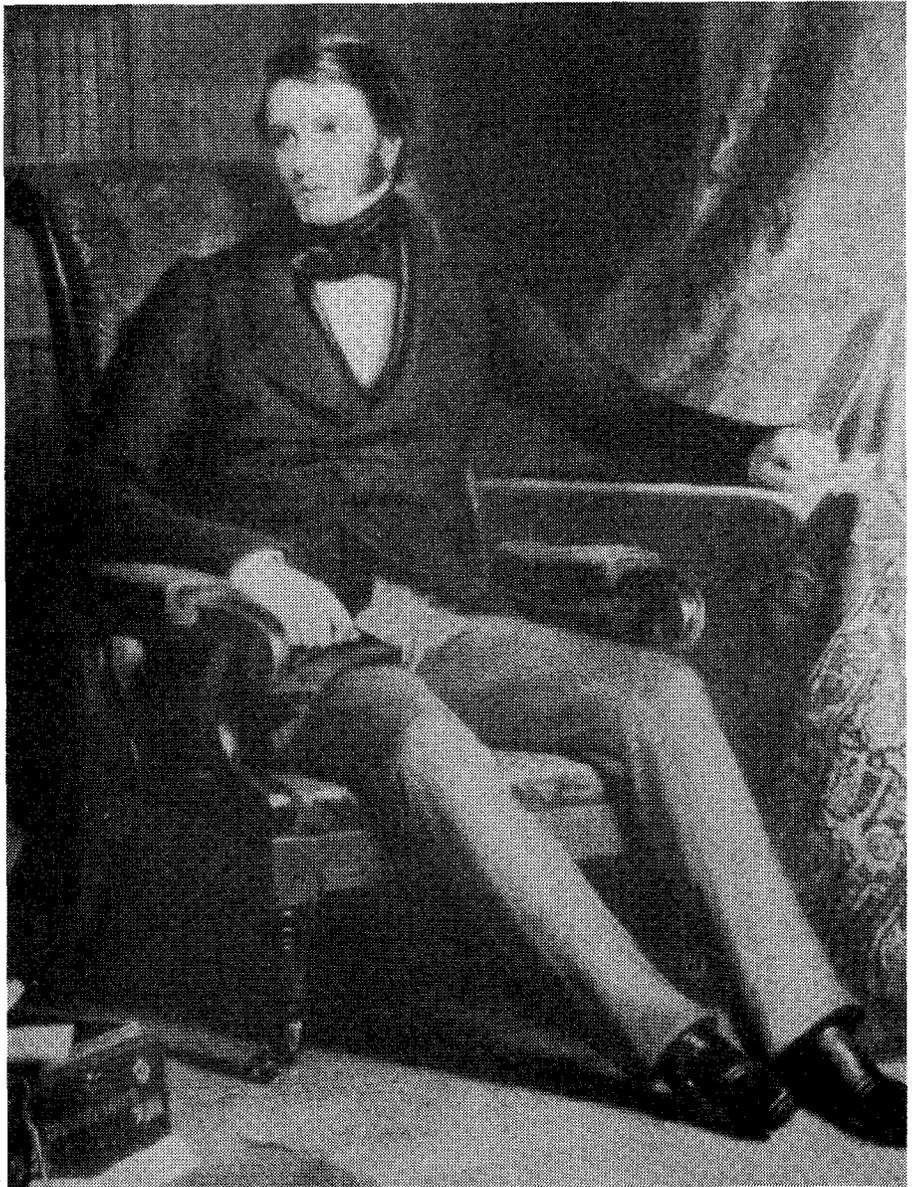
Meanwhile Peel, having passed the repeal of the corn laws, lost the support of his own party and was defeated on a coercion bill for Ireland; so on 29 June he resigned and the Whigs came into office with Lord John Russell as Premier. The latter was neither as energetic an administrator as his predecessor nor as capable a financier. He also lacked the intimate knowledge of Irish affairs which Peel had possessed from his term of office as Chief Secretary for Ireland; nor had he the practical ability to rise above the economic doctrines of the time. In politics he had been brought up in the circle of Whigs who, from the time of their adoption of the reform movement, had

doctrines of *laissez faire* were a potent excuse for inactivity.

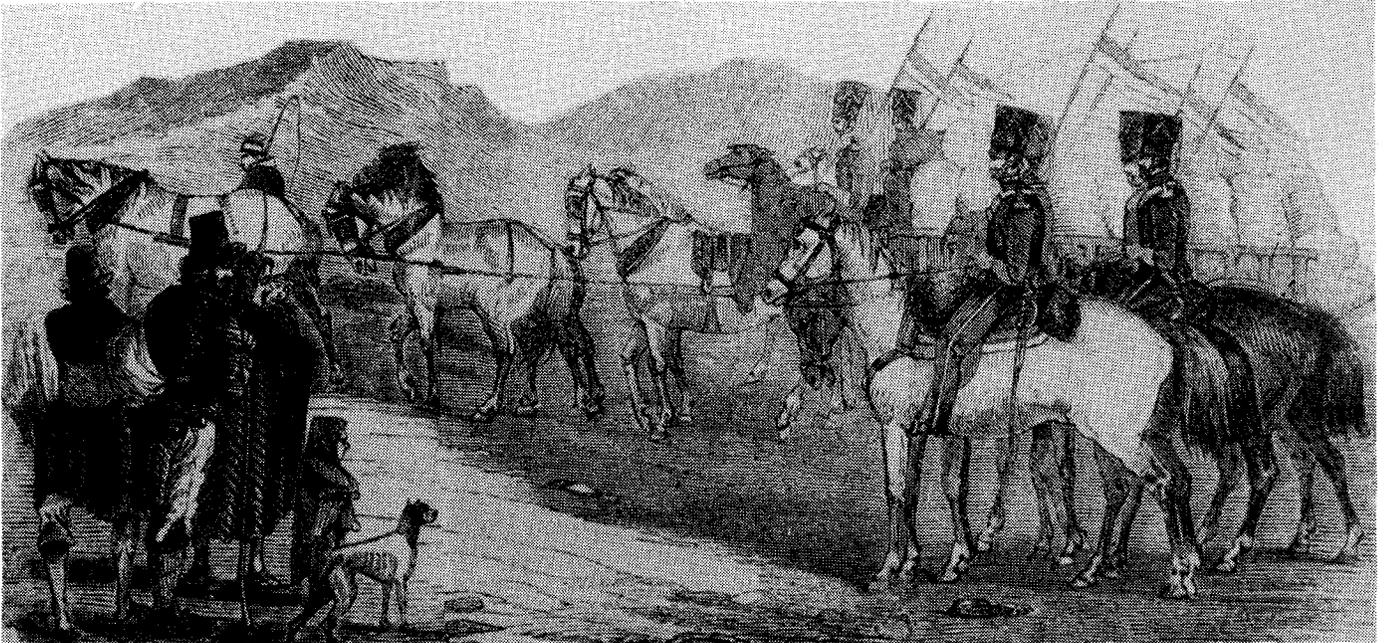
The blight, which appeared on the potato crop in Ireland in September 1845,⁽⁶⁾ had been noticed in America and on the continent in previous years. When the Irish crop became affected, the food of a large proportion of the population was in jeopardy. Remedial measures for the economic situation of the country were now too late and the government's efforts had naturally to be directed to meet the immediate crisis with which it was faced. Scientific investigation during the late autumn failed to find any means of preventing the spread of the disease, and Robert Peel, the Prime Minister, set about the organisation of relief measures. The primary principle of his schemes was the purchase by the government of Indian corn, to be sold at a reduced rate in areas where prices showed a tendency to rise. In this way an effective means of price control was established. However, as the economic structure based on the barter system⁽⁶⁾ collapsed with the potato failure, a system of money wages had to be introduced to give the labouring population the means of purchasing food.

To this end public employment schemes were initiated. The type of work undertaken usually was the building and improvement of roads, and the schemes were operated under two statutes. Under the first⁽⁶⁾ the Board of Works controlled the relief works, one half of the cost being charged to the Consolidated Fund and the other half to the local landowners who were to repay, over a number of years, a loan given by the government to cover their share of the expenses. The total cost of the schemes under the second statute⁽⁷⁾ was to be met by a government loan to be repaid in full by a local tax, but these works were controlled locally by the county surveyors and were carried out by contractors. Public employment was not given in the first season until March, 1846, and did not reach any great dimensions until June or July. In all about 150,000 was the greatest number employed at any one

time during the season, which ended in August with the beginning of harvest operations. Concurrent with these schemes, local committees were formed to meet all cases of urgent need which were



Charles Trevelyan. Engraving from a portrait by E.U. Eddis.



Food supplies under military cordon. Engraving, *Pictorial Times*, 30 October, 1847.

accepted the theories laid down by early nineteenth century economists as inexorable laws. The almost complete failure of the potato crop in the harvest of 1846 presented this new premier with a problem of far greater magnitude than that which had been dealt with successfully by Peel.

Non-interference with the markets was the major point of difference between Russell's and Peel's measures. It was decided that the government should not import food, and though some depots for the sale of food were to be opened in the west of Ireland their object was not to keep down prices; they confined their operations to places where merchants did not usually trade. Stocks were purchased in the United Kingdom and were sold at these depots at the price prevailing in the neighbourhood. Public works were again started as the basis of relief measures, but they differed from those operated under Peel in that the total cost was to be repaid to the exchequer by local taxation and in that they were all controlled by the Board of Works.⁽⁹⁾ Most of the Irish newspapers recommended the principles adopted by the Prime Minister.⁽¹⁰⁾ The O'Connellite paper, the *Freeman's Journal*, thought that the scheme was well calculated to avert starvation.⁽¹¹⁾ It foresaw, however, the difficulty of any large-scale employment scheme finding enough public works of utility over a lengthy period and would have favoured the adoption of productive works on the development of waste lands. This was the only point of constructive criticism made against the government even by the *Nation* which, however, was strongly in favour of the prohibition of the export of food.⁽¹²⁾ The extensive distress threw an immense number of labourers on the employment machinery. By November over 250,000 persons were engaged on the public schemes daily and the machinery broke down under the pressure. Pay clerks failed to issue wages to people dependent on the regular payment of their

earnings. Deaths by starvation were reported in increasing numbers. The price of food rose and was not followed by any commensurate rise in wages. By March, 1847, when the total number employed had reached 734,792, the executive realised that the scheme had failed and it was decided instead that the government should undertake the provision of daily rations for the destitute.

Under the 'Soup Kitchen Act'⁽¹³⁾ a relief commission was established to organise this extensive system of food distribution. Local committees, which had hitherto assisted the sick and those incapable of work, were reconstituted to operate the scheme. Soup kitchens were established throughout the country and maintained out of the poor rates or by a government loan repayable by the ratepayers. Deaths by starvation, which had been so common during the winter of 1846-7, declined throughout the late spring and summer, and rations were distributed to over 3,000,000 persons daily in July, 1847. Meanwhile the poor law was amended to allow outdoor relief under the scheme from the autumn of 1847 onwards. Hitherto assistance under the poor law commissioners had been confined to inmates of the workhouses; henceforth a limited form of home assistance was allowed. Probably the most reprehensible provision of the amending Act was the infamous 'Gregory (or quarter-acre) clause', which disqualified for relief plot-holders of one rood or more. Some, in the succeeding years, died of starvation rather than surrender their holdings, while landlords used the clause as a lever for clearing their estates.

The problem which had faced Peel in autumn, 1845, was not so great as that which confronted Russell a year later, when there was an almost total failure of the potato crop. The measures adopted by the former, however, were better calculated to meet the impending situation than were those of his successor. First of

all, by importing food and selling it at a low price in areas where prices began to rise, the government had a means of price control which defeated attempts at cornering the market. By localising the control of works, the total cost of which was to be defrayed locally, Peel avoided the breakdown of the central administration and the consequent delays which were to affect Russell's relief organisation even before the numbers employed by Peel were exceeded. The Whig government, in an effort to confine relief strictly to those in absolute need, imposed overstringent tests on applicants and left too little to the discretion of the local administrator. As a result people were often so weak from hunger before qualifying that they were unfit for employment. In his preparations for an outbreak of fever Peel evinced a foresight not shown by his successor, as the board of health formed in March, 1846, was allowed to lapse shortly after Russell's entry into office. In March, 1847, however, when fever was already rampant, Russell was forced to establish such a body to deal with the situation.

One of the main faults of Russell's approach to the Irish famine was the tendency to accept it as a normal period of distress consequent on a slump in the trade cycle. In India it was found that, in the emergency of a famine, no localisation of taxation was justifiable. In Ireland, during Peel's administration, the government shared the burden of the public works with the local proprietors. Under the Whig government, however, the works were made a completely local burden and this in a year of even greater suffering than the previous season. Having to bear the cost of government schemes, proprietors were unable to employ their own tenants in the improvement of their estates. The principle that each area should support its own poor was basic in the poor law, which was designed to meet ordinary poverty. When, in 1849, a rate-in-

aid was levied on all the unions in Ireland to assist the unions which were deepest in debt, the principle was discarded, but it showed also how imperfect was the union between Ireland and England. Had the union been real, the United Kingdom as a whole should have been taxed to meet the needs of the distressed districts. In all, the expenditure of the Treasury to meet the famine amounted to £8,111,941, most of which was to be repaid.⁽¹⁴⁾ In 1848, 1850 and 1851, due to the impossibility of collecting the debts, large scale remissions had to be allowed. In his budget speech⁽¹⁵⁾ in 1853, William Ewart Gladstone announced the government's intention to remit the debt on the whole country, and to impose instead duties on spirits and to extend the income tax to Ireland. This announcement was not received with much pleasure in Ireland. It was almost universally condemned in the newspapers,⁽¹⁶⁾ and was received as a boon only in those areas which had the largest rate of repayment under the Annuities Act and had the least liabilities under the income tax scheme. It also had the effect of benefiting the purchasers of land under the Encumbered Estates Act, as they had purchased cheaply because of the debts which were now removed; whereas those owners who, through the famine debt, had been forced to sell at a reduced price benefited nothing by the final remission.⁽¹⁷⁾

Failure to prohibit the export of food from Ireland has been the basis of the severest criticism levelled against the government. John Mitchel goes so far as to say that during all the famine years the country was producing sufficient food to support not nine but eighteen million people.⁽¹⁸⁾ In support of this contention he quotes the figures for exportation of corn during 1845,⁽¹⁹⁾ but it is the figures for 1846 which are really important as the effect of prohibition of export must be gauged for the cereal year 1846-7. The wheat harvest of 1846 was described as an average one, though oats and barley were decidedly deficient.⁽²⁰⁾ The total produce of wheat cannot have been more than 8,000,000 cwt.,⁽²¹⁾ and according to some calculations would have been even less.⁽²²⁾ This would have allowed for a ration of about 6 oz. of bread per day to the population if a comprehensive rationing scheme on modern lines were introduced. This, with no alternative food, would have been an inadequate ration. In practice the wheat would have been used by the middle and upper classes and the residue alone would have been available to those who had hitherto depended on the potato. The amount exported would have been divided among this portion of the population. Exports in 1846 amounted to only about half of the previous year's figures and, if distributed among the 3,000,000 people who were really destitute, the food would have allowed a ration of about 2½ oz. of wheaten flour, 2¾ oz. of oatmeal and less than 3 oz. of meat daily.⁽²³⁾ While this disposes of the view that there were adequate food



Queen Victoria, 1840.

supplies in the country, it is nevertheless true that the prohibition of exportation should have been undertaken. It was impossible, however, so long as the government refused to import food. The only hope for meeting the deficiency in Ireland lay in the exportation of a dear commodity and the purchase of a cheap alternative with the credits, and having resolved to abstain from entering the market the government had to leave the ports open.

The employment schemes were criticised for not being turned to the improvement of waste lands. Criticism has gone so far as to suggest that all the famine works were useless. Actually they were not. In their early stages the improvement of communications was really necessary and useful. In the second year schemes became redundant and

useless through their multiplicity, and it was increasingly difficult to find useful works of the type prescribed by the Act. Under the pressure of public opinion and at the behest of the Lord Lieutenant, the Earl of Bessborough, some drainage schemes were sanctioned but the limiting provisions were such as to make these works almost negligible. Having decided to make the cost of the works a local burden, the government should have seen to it that the capital was not wasted. The type of works could not have made much difference in averting starvation during 1846-7, but by assisting increased production it would have helped to improve matters during succeeding years. Thus the opportunity to improve the country was lost and the capital of the already impoverished landlords was still further diminished without any good

having come to their estates. The government had failed to meet the Irish crisis; but matters were never again so bad after the famine as they had been before. The famine in its own grim relentless fashion had gone far towards providing a solution of Ireland's difficulties, though the basic problem of the relations between landlord and tenant was unsolved and insoluble until the government was willing to form a peasant proprietorship.

Emigration had been increasing during the years preceding the potato failure. In 1846 it was estimated that 105,955 persons left Ireland. With the increased destitution and desperation of 1847, 215,444 emigrated. The improved harvest of 1847 accounts for a decline in the rate of the exodus in 1848, but the figures mounted again the following year and in 1851 the climax was reached when 249,721 left the country.⁽²⁴⁾ In this can be seen the cumulative effect of the famine, for those assisted by emigrants of 1847 must have formed a large proportion of those who travelled in 1851. Inadequate passenger legislation made the lot of the emigrants pitiable, and those who dreamt of lands flowing with milk and honey and cities with gold-paved streets were sadly disappointed in the grim confines of quarantined emigrant ships or on the docks of American cities where they were a prey to all kinds of fraud. Innumerable thousands, who left their homes to escape pestilence, fell victims to it on the journey and found a grave far from their native country. Some did find a land where the sun always shone and they were the founders of Ireland's spiritual empire. The greater proportion by far were Catholics and they have left their mark on the Church in the lands to which they travelled.

At home deaths were a daily occurrence. It is really impossible to estimate the numbers who fell victims to fever, disease and starvation. The figures which survive are but approximations and are probably understated. Starvation is said to have accounted for 21,770 deaths during the famine years,⁽²⁵⁾ while almost a quarter of a million died from fever⁽²⁶⁾ and nearly 100,000 from dysentery.⁽²⁷⁾ The figures for death by starvation appear very small, but it must be remembered that many who died of a variety of causes, such as exposure or even throat diseases, were really victims of starvation which was thus the indirect cause of death. The figures available account for only 1,372,382 deaths between 1841 and 1851, and the number of emigrants in the same period totalled 1,240,737. Allowing for normal increase the population in 1845 would have been about 8,500,000; in 1851 it was only 6,552,385.⁽²⁸⁾ Thus with awful horror was the problem of a redundant population solved and the sluice-gates opened for the emigration which followed in the wake of the famine.

In another way the famine did tend to solve Irish problems. In 1841 there were 573,153 holdings of between one and fifteen acres; by 1851 this number

had fallen to 279,937,⁽²⁹⁾ due to the consolidation of farms and the operation of the 'quarter acre clause'. Thus was eliminated the class which, before the famine, had the same standard of living as the labourer but the social status of a farmer. The old holdings had been uneconomic units and the distress of 1847 helped to depress that class into the ranks of the day labourers. The debts incurred by landlords during the famine, added to the mortgages of previous generations, made imperative the passing of the Encumbered Estates Act in 1849. The attention of the government was now riveted on the evils of the Irish land system, and the first steps were taken in large-scale government interference with the land of Ireland. In politics the problems of landlord and tenant came to the fore with the establishment of the Tenant Right League and Repeal faded into the background.

The catastrophe left a feeling of long-standing bitterness in its wake. While the activities of the Central Relief Committee of the Society of Friends and the assistance sent from America are not forgotten, there is little memory of the British Relief Association and the subscriptions raised in England. Queen Victoria is popularly believed to have contributed £5, whereas she actually gave £2,500.⁽³⁰⁾ The acrimony is due to some extent to the writings of Irish nationalists who have accepted John Mitchel's satire as history, and also to the sufferings which were witnessed during the period. The uncoffined and even unburied dead seared the memories of those who survived. Bodies devoured by dogs and the dogs in turn devoured by human beings, the demented starving mother who ate the flesh of her own child dead by fever,⁽³¹⁾ these stood as a reproach to the government which had failed to govern. No wonder, then, that bitterness moulded Irish politics in the succeeding years. Many an emigrant cherished these memories and believed that he left behind a country groaning under the heel of a foreigner who would not falter at a merciless scheme for the annihilation of the Irish people.⁽³²⁾ From any such charge the English governments must be completely exonerated.⁽³³⁾ Though Russell's relief efforts failed, they were made in good faith. Perhaps more blame attaches to the pre-famine legislators, who allowed the situation to develop, than to the Russell administration. The defeatist attitude of that government, however, revealed in a letter from Charles Edward Trevelyan to Lord Monteagle in October, 1846, reflects the weakness of all the administrations of the early nineteenth century. "I hope", he said, "that I am not guilty of irreverence in thinking that, this [the root of the social evil of Ireland] being altogether beyond the power of man, the cure has been applied by the direct stroke of an all-wise Providence in a manner as unexpected and as unthought of as it is likely to be effectual".⁽³⁴⁾ Probably at that early date he did not

realise the full import of his words, for the famine did help to solve Ireland's problems, but at what a cost!

REFERENCES

1. C.E. Trevelyan, *Irish Crisis*, p. 48. I am indebted to Professor R. Dudley Edwards for helpful criticism of this article.
2. Barbara Kerr, 'Irish Seasonal Migration to Great Britain, 1800-38', in *Irish Hist. Studies*, iii. 365-80 (September, 1943).
3. C.E. Trevelyan, *Irish Crisis*, pp. 13-19.
4. *Dublin Evening Post*, 9 September, 1845.
5. Generally called the 'truck' system, under which the only real medium of exchange in Ireland was the potato.
6. p Vic. c. 1.
7. 9 Vic. c. 2.
8. *The Times*, 7 January, 1847; *Cork Constitution*, 16 July, 1846; *Dublin Evening Mail*, 26 March, 1847; *Freeman's Journal*, 5 April, 1847; *Nation*, 15 August, 1846; Trevelyan, *Irish Crisis*, p. 49; Isaac Butt, *A Voice for Ireland: the Famine in the Land*, p. 4.
9. 9 and 10 Vic. c. 107.
10. *Dublin Evening Mail*, 2 September, 1846; *Dublin Evening Post*, 20 August, 1846; *Freeman's Journal*, 19, 20, 21 August, 1848.
11. *Ibid.*, 20 August, 1846.
12. *Nation*, 15, 29 August, 1846.
13. 10 Vic. c. 7.
14. *Transactions of the Central Relief Committee of the Society of Friends*, p. 45.
15. Hansard, *Parliamentary Debates*, cxxv. 1402-3.
16. *Nation*, 23 April, 1853; *Dublin Evening Mail*, 20, 22, 25 April, 1853; *Dublin Evening Post*, 21 April, 1853.
17. *Dublin Evening Mail*, 22 April, 1853.
18. *An Apology for the British Government in Ireland* (1905), p. 11.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 25.
20. C.E. Trevelyan, *Irish Crisis*, p. 41.
21. See *Agricultural Statistics, 1847-1926*, p. 12.
22. *Thoms Directory*, 1848, p. 162.
23. *Ibid.*, pp. 163, 167, where calculations based on 1845 exportation are given. In 1845 327,719 quarters of wheat, 1,679,958 quarters of oats, 1,422,379 cwt. of wheatmeal or flour and 1,059,185 cwt. of oatmeal were exported.
24. *Census, 1851*, Pt. V., p. 243.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 253.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 248.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 251.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 245.
29. *Ibid.*, Pt. II., p. vi.
30. *Report of the British Relief Association*, p. 10; Trevelyan, *Irish Crisis*, p. 117. She offered £1,000, but Stephen Spring Rice, the secretary and founder of the association, protested, so it was increased to £2,000. She later gave £500 to the Ladies' Clothing Association.
31. *Freeman's Journal*, 22 April, 1848; *Census, 1851*, Pt. V., p. 310.
32. Mitchel, *An Apology for the British Government in Ireland*, p. 50.
33. *Nation*, 27 March, 1847.
34. N.L.I., MSS., 'Monteagle Correspondence', Trevelyan to Monteagle, 9 October, 1846. Writing in 1848, he repeated this statement in similar terms (*Irish Crisis*, p. 201).

(Reprinted from *The Irish Ecclesiastical Record*, Vol. lxxix, No. 11, November, 1947).