

Pine Coffin Reports

Some Government Correspondence, 1846

Compiled by William Murray

Sir Edward Pine Coffin (1784-1862) was the youngest son of the Rev. John Pine, who was born at Eastdown, Devonshire, on the 20 October, 1784. He entered the commissariat as a clerk on 25 July, 1805, and was made acting assistant in the following year, assistant commissary-general in 1809, deputy commissary-general in 1814, and commissary-general on 1 July, 1840. He served all over the world, including places like Spain, Canada and China. From January, 1846 to March, 1848, he served in Ireland and Scotland and had charge of the relief operations at Limerick and in the west of Ireland during the famine up to August, 1846, at the termination of which he was knighted by patent in recognition of his services. He was employed and paid from 1 April, 1848, as one of the commissioners of the royal mint. Coffin, who was unmarried, died at his residence, Gay Street, Bath, 31 July, 1862. *Dictionary of National Biography*, Vol. IV, (1917, London).

Commissary - General Coffin to Charles Trevelyan.

17 February, 1846.

... the uncertainty hitherto prevailing with regard to the nature and extent of the intended Government measures having very much perplexed people of all classes, and rendered them doubtful how to act. I have already corrected many misapprehensions, and I hope succeeded, in some small degree, in inspiring confidence in our intentions; but when scarcely any two men agreed in opinion on the extent of the evil, or the nature of the appropriate remedy, it is not to be expected that many should unite in a thorough approval of our proceedings.

... but I am most anxious that the suggestion of the Government should be promulgated as speedily as possible, because, until we see in what spirit and to what extent they are practically adopted through the country, it will be impossible to judge of the kind and degree of exertion likely to be required on our part.

Commissary-General Coffin to Sir R. Routh.

16 March, 1848.

At present I believe that these resources are in most situations still open to those who can earn reasonable wages, and I accordingly do my best to urge not only the employment of those who are, or are likely to be destitute, but that exertions should be used to provide for them such employment as will afford money wages, in order that they may as long as possible, subsist on the natural supplies of the country, and that those imported by us may be held in reserve for the period when the ordinary resources of the market shall fail. Unless this precaution be observed, I fear that there is great risk of our stores being exhausted before the period of want is at an end, or of the Government being obliged to pay exorbitant prices in order to replenish them as the season advances.

Commissary-General Coffin to Charles Trevelyan.

30 March, 1846.

I did not attach much importance to the refusal of the people in the workhouse to eat Indian corn meal. Great pains have been taken by ill-disposed or interested persons to excite a prejudice against it; and, considering it as an attempt to lower the scale of their food. English paupers might probably have done the same under the same circumstances.

... it is much too good a thing to be long rejected by starving people; and all my fear is lest they should eat it faster than we can supply it.

Commissary-General Coffin to Mr. Archer.

30 March, 1846.

Though the outcry is probably greater than the occasion yet justifies, I have no doubt that the distress from the failure of the potatoes is already becoming in many instances very severe, more especially in the country adjacent to this place. The quantity still remaining is very great, for it is allowed on all hands to have been an immense crop,

estimated by some at double the average of ordinary years; but the decay during the last month has been most rapid; and I have been assured by people who had no interest in deceiving me, that when they thought themselves secure of a supply through the season, they have all at once been obliged to go to market for their immediate wants. Yet others say that they have scarcely had a bad potato; and the only invariable fact which I have been able to ascertain in my inquiries through the country is, that the richest soil is that in which the disease has caused the greatest loss. To this must be attributed the great failure in this neighbourhood, the counties of Clare, Tipperary and Limerick, containing some of the most productive land in Ireland. The land manured with sea-weed appears to have suffered nearly in the same degree as the deep alluvial soils, and hence arises the great distress on the sea-coast, naturally a poor country, and growing but little corn.

Charles Trevelyan to Commissary-General Coffin.

31 March, 1846.

Your letter is too grave and important a nature to admit of my returning an answer to it without careful consideration ...

The subject has two opposite sides, both of which are full of doubt and difficulty; and, between the evils of doing too little, and attempting too much, I fear that our only real satisfaction will be that we shall have acquitted ourselves to the best of our ability in the difficult task which has fallen to our lot, and that all that human aid could do, has been done to avert the calamity.

Commissary-General Coffin to Charles Trevelyan.

8 April, 1846.

Since I wrote to you on the 30th, the cry of distress in this part of the country has rapidly increased, and I think that no reasonable doubt can be felt that it is a cry of real distress. Not a day passes in which I have not applications, personally, or in writing, for the purchase of meal. These applications come from various and distant points in the three or four adjoining counties, but all turn upon the same general representation of the failure of the poor man's stock of potatoes, of the deficient quantity, and high price of those brought to market, of the similarly high price of oatmeal, the readiest substitute for them, and of the good effect expected from bringing the Indian corn meal into competition, even though in very small quantities, in the way both of reducing prices, and of drawing out the remaining stocks of potatoes, which many are said to be hoarding, in hopes of an exorbitant price, though at the risk of a total loss by decay. On these grounds I recommend a cautious opening of our depots.

... I still labour to convince applicants of the importance, for their own sake, of reserving our supplies for the approaching period of real scarcity, and with some nevertheless they seem now to be persuaded of this; but I think that all are exceptions surprised to find that the Government provision of food is so limited, having been led to believe, not only from common report, but from indefinite terms of the printed instructions, that the resource was of much larger extent, and would

be available whenever the contingencies under which it is there promised should arise. The money grants in aid of private subscriptions are too many, however, almost an equal surprise, and go far, I think, towards allaying the discontent that would otherwise be expressed, as they show that the Government is in earnest, and not, as was at one time commonly apprehended, deceiving them with a mere show of assistance. The strongest proof, however, of the real scarcity of potato food is the earnestness with which they still press for ever so small a quantity of our meal, with the view of influencing the markets, and also satisfying the poor that something is being done for them.

I have within a few days submitted, and yesterday received a favourable answer to the proposal made by me, tending to encourage and facilitate the purchase of private cargoes of Indian corn when brought in for sale. It was founded on an application made to me by Mr. Monsell, of Trevoe, who was very desirous of buying, in concert with some other large proprietors, a large supply of this kind for distribution in their localities, but found himself stopped by the difficulty of its safe custody during the period of gradual consumption. This I have endeavoured to get over, by obtaining permission to receive it into our charge, and deliver it to the parties from time to time in quantities suitable for their more detailed distribution, the question of the expense of storage etc. remaining open for reference to the Treasury. I am led to expect that cargoes of this kind will be imported, perhaps freely, if they find a ready sale, but I doubt if they can be purchased much for country use, at low prices at least, unless encouragement of this kind is given; but as every such purchase must serve to relieve the pressure of demand upon our depots, it seems to me well worth our while to incur the additional trouble, if not the additional expense of such an arrangement. I have mentioned it to other country gentlemen since Mr. Monsell talked to me about it, and the idea seems to take. The Limerick Committee want also to avail themselves of it, but this I resist, because I do not see the grounds for relieving them of the charge of their own property. As usual, however, they catch at every assistance from the Government.

Commissary-General Coffin to Charles Trevelyan.

11 April, 1846.

... His condition excludes him from the circle in which commerce revolves, and as his labour avails him only the direct production of the food on which he depends for subsistence, the failure of that food leaves him incapable of profiting by the resources of the market, and consequently liable to starve in the midst of plenty. Not having the legal claim support of the English labourer, his only sure refuge is in the care of the Government, and in such circumstances is it possible for the Government to refuse it? The answer seems to be already given. Right or wrong the Government has committed itself to the principle of interference, and the remaining question is, to what extent it should be carried out. I am almost inclined to believe that the Government would have acted more prudently in abstaining from any direct interference in regard to food. The essential difference in the condition of the great mass of the Irish population and that of England and Scotland, consists in the inability of the former to earn money wherewith food may be purchased. All, perhaps, that the occasion really needed was to remedy this inequality by extraordinary means of employment, when the certainty that the people had money to spend would have sufficed, in the ordinary course of traffic, to bring food within their reach. This course, however, has not been adopted - supplies of food have been provided by the Government, and the supposed extent of this provision is said to have stopped private speculation in the same direction, until, at a comparatively late period, it became known that the Government supply is inadequate to the probable extraordinary demand.

... there still exists a great quantity of food of various kinds in the country and I am quite satisfied, but as the customary market for it is elsewhere, there can be no certainty of its remaining here for consumption, or, if it does remain, it may rise to an exorbitant price. Importation will tend to remove the difficulty arising from either cause, but may also serve greatly to diminish the drain on our depots, and prevent them from being exhausted before the end of the season of want; but I fear that it be at any rate a hard struggle.

A further question of deep interest is, whether or not similar assistance will be required in the ensuing year. Even should the potato disease not re-appear, it is generally anticipated that the coming crop must be deficient in quantity by reasons of diminished



Three armed young men lie in wait.
Engraving, *Historic Times*, 1 June, 1849.

cultivation, for many will not have seed to sow, at the risk of losing both crop and rent. In any case, however, I should hope that, with ample time for preparation and the benefit of this year's experience, any measures necessary will be effected with comparative facility; and I should also hope that it may be found possible to confine them to the care of enabling the people to buy food, leaving to private competition that of providing it. If a false step has been taken, it need not therefore be repeated.

Charles Trevelyan to Commissary-General Coffin.

13 April, 1846.

The encouragement given by you to the laudable efforts which are being made by private individuals to help the suffering people through this season of distress is highly approved, and it is gratifying to observe that these efforts have taken a direction calculated to stimulate the importation of supplies of cheap and nourishing food on private account.

The extent to which a Government can assist in feeding a whole people is so limited, and, even to the degree to which it is in its power to assist, its interference is open to so many objections, that our first efforts should be directed to support the exertions of private benevolence, and to give the utmost possible scope to the importation of food on private account, and the gradual sale of that which is the produce of the country.

Commissary-General Coffin to Charles Trevelyan.**23 April, 1846.**

I have had a great deal of talk and correspondence arising out of the application from Committees for the immediate issue of meal; but these are now becoming less numerous, and though in a few cases more urgent, I find that our motive for holding back begins to be appreciated, and is highly commended by all who look beyond the present moment. The meal selling on private account is in very considerable demand; and I was lately assured by one of the most respectable merchants here, who imported the cargo purchased by the Relief Committee of the place, that very large orders for cargoes of Indian corn have been sent to all parts of the world.

Commissary-General Coffin to Charles Trevelyan.**29 May, 1846.**

I have scarcely had a moment's respite from the eager demands for meal pouring in upon me from all quarters; the sudden reduction of price, accompanied by an intimation that the previous restrictions on the extent of the issues was taken off, has brought this pressure upon us all at once; and it being, as you may suppose, attended by all sorts of irregularities and misconceptions on the part of the committees, whom it is very necessary to bring into some degree of order before the business proceed further, I have been incessantly occupied in talking or writing on this subject during the past week. It is a sort of era in our progress, which I want to make the subject of a letter to you, but I cannot sufficiently collect my thoughts for the purpose until this burst of applications subsides a little; but in the meanwhile it will be satisfactory to you to know that our prospects are, on the whole, more cheering than they were last month. The early potato crops are promising; there is a good deal of employment; prices are falling; and the people of all classes seem to be satisfied with our arrangements in their behalf, and with the prospect of getting through the crisis. Some exceptions there are, as to particular localities, but they are not numerous. We have, however, a long season before us, and must expect many difficulties yet to arise.

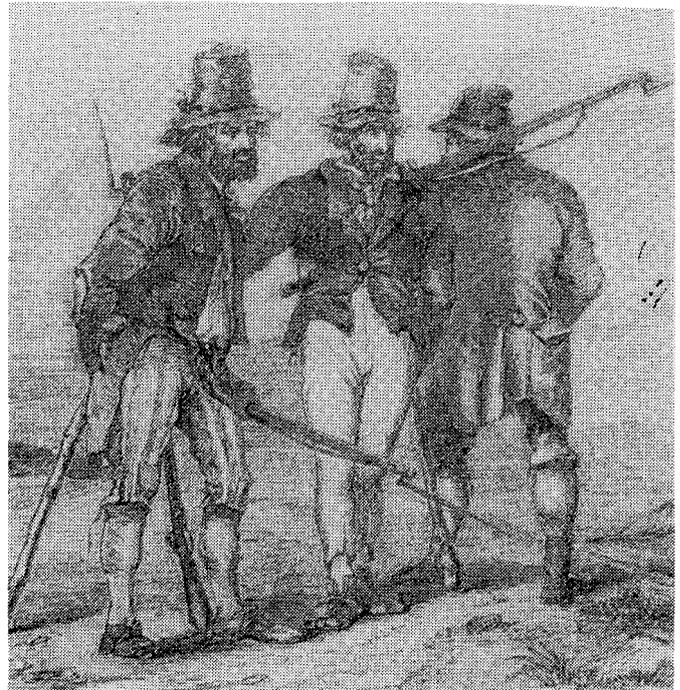
Commissary-General Coffin to Charles Trevelyan.**4 June, 1846.**

We are now sufficiently far advanced in the measure of opening our depots, and selling at the reduced price of 10l. per ton, to see somewhat of its effects. It has been a most laborious, and, what I regard more, an unsatisfactory task for me, because I could obtain no sort of rule or guide to direct me in the distribution, nor had any distinct intimation been made to the Committees of the main principles of which it was to be governed.

... The important benefit arising from the introduction of the Indian corn on the present occasion is acknowledged by all, no doubt being entertained that, but for this, famine prices must be prevailed. Although the duration of the potatoes has much surpassed any calculation, large quantities still remaining in some localities, and a certain portion in a great many, large districts are, and have been for weeks past, wholly destitute of them, and in these, Indian meal has become the chief, in some the sole, substitute for the sustenance of the poorer class. Even with the competition, oatmeal maintained for some time a price 20 to 25 per cent above the usual the usual rate; and I have been repeatedly been told that, in the absence of the Indian corn, it must have risen, as on former occasions of the same kind, to double the ordinary price. The common sequel to this remark is, 'and we should have had the people in insurrection'. On the other hand, the evil inseparable from the intervention of the Government also begins to manifest itself. The dealers say that, since our large issues began, their trade is at an end, and complain that the stocks laid in by them for the supply of the country will become, by our competition, a dead weight on their hands.

Commissary-General Coffin to Charles Trevelyan.**24 June, 1846.**

The prejudice of the people against the use of Indian corn, never in my mind very formidable, may now said to have passed away altogether in this part of the country. They do not eat it merely as the alternative of starvation, but I am assured that they prefer it to any other substitute to their accustomed food, and so much that few of the Committees now attempt to offer them anything else, and their sales of this meal are, with the exception of a few favoured districts, the sole resource of the poorer population throughout the south-western part of



Three armed peasants waiting for the approach of the meal cart. Engraving, Pictorial Times, 30 October, 1847.

Ireland. To cut off this resource would have such consequences that, I believe, no committee would attempt it, were the Government aid wholly withdrawn, for it is acknowledged on all hands that the country, at present in a state of the most perfect quietness, has been saved from one of turbulence and plunder only by the system of measures adopted, and principally by the introduction of this new species of food.

The sudden reduction of price, accompanied by an intimation that the previous restrictions on the extent of the issues, was taken off, has brought this pressure upon us all at once; and it being, as you may suppose, attended by all sorts of irregularities and misconceptions on the part of the committees, whom it is very necessary to bring into some degree of order before the business proceeds.

Constabulary Reports.**Limerick, December 19, 1846.**

On the 19th instant, at 3p.m., while the magistrates were at the petty sessions at Glin, a mob of 300 persons rushed into the room, and kept the magistrates till five o'clock, crying for employment, increased wages, and not to employ strangers. Two engineers and the clerk, who were with the magistrates, were obliged to get out through the window by a ladder.

Lieut.-Colonel Jones to Charles Trevelyan.**Office of Public Works, Dublin, December 30, 1846.**

We have had another pay-clerk robbed of 630l; but the circumstances are not very clear in his favour. We have caused inquiry to be made, and the police are on the alert. The Board have offered a reward of 100l., which may (but I speak with great doubt) induce some person to turn informer.

A copy of a report from Lieutenant Inglis, R.E., is forwarded, which details an attack made upon one of the Royal Sappers and Miners, who was superintending a work as overseer near Croom, in the county of Limerick. The Sapper appears to have behaved in a most praiseworthy and gallant manner. A special report will be made in regard to his conduct after the receipt of the report on the proceedings to-day before the magistrates. The work is stopped, and will continue so for the present. Lieutenant Inglis acted very properly in communicating to the engineer that his power did not extend to re-opening a work once closed. I have written to Mr. Redington, suggesting that some of the pensioners might be armed, to give our pay-clerks escort when required. I understand that it cannot be done without the Duke of Wellington's authority. The applications for drainage under the Treasury Minute are beginning to multiply very fast. We are dreadfully incommoded for want of office room.

Lieut. Inglis to Captain Wynne.**Limerick, December 31, 1846.**

I beg herewith to submit a Report of an attack made upon Private Windsor, of the detachment under my command, when visiting the Relief Work called "Pullogh new line of road", in the immediate vicinity of the town of Croom, on Saturday last, the 26th instant.

On the day above named, Private Windsor proceeded to the Pullogh line at the hour of about 9a.m., for the usual purposes of superintendence, and in compliance with instructions received from Mr. Hunt, engineer, in charge of that district. From that hour until 2p.m., he was engaged with the check-clerk in measuring and inspecting work, and throughout that time, a spirit of dissatisfaction was manifested by a great proportion of the labourers against him, although nothing transpired of any serious character; at this hour, when passing down the line, a little in advance of the check-clerk, whose name is William Lindsay, a steward, and a number of the labourers of the work, he was suddenly met by two persons in women's clothes, with bonnets and veils, one armed with a gun, the other with a pistol. They immediately presented their pieces at him, and ordered him to kneel; this he stoutly refused to do, and they at once closed upon him, he called frequently for assistance to those looking on, but no one came forward, he at once seized the person armed with the pistol by the throat, and grasped the pistol with the other in such a manner, that when the trigger was pulled, the hammer fell upon his thumb. After a severe struggle of some minutes, during which, Windsor continually with his elbow turned off the muzzle of the gun, which was pointed directly at his body, the two fell together in the road. Being unable to shoot the one without injuring the other, the person with the gun commenced beating Windsor with the but end of his piece. After a lapse of several minutes, and when Windsor had secure hold of the man who was down, and apparently mastered him, Lindsay, brother to the check-clerk, and son of a "strong" farmer in the neighbourhood, came forward from the rest, and taking hold of his (Windsor's) arm, caused him to lose his grasp of the man's throat, and getting free, they both escaped, and Windsor returned into Croom, and immediately reported the circumstance.

During a lengthened investigation of two days, Private Windsor's evidence has been most satisfactorily given, and although it is difficult to assign any particular reasons for this atrocious and daring attempt on his life, it is strong in the minds of most persons, that it not only was premeditated, but that a very large proportion of the labourers and superintendents of this work (amounting nearly to 200 persons), if not all, were directly or indirectly engaged in this scheme.

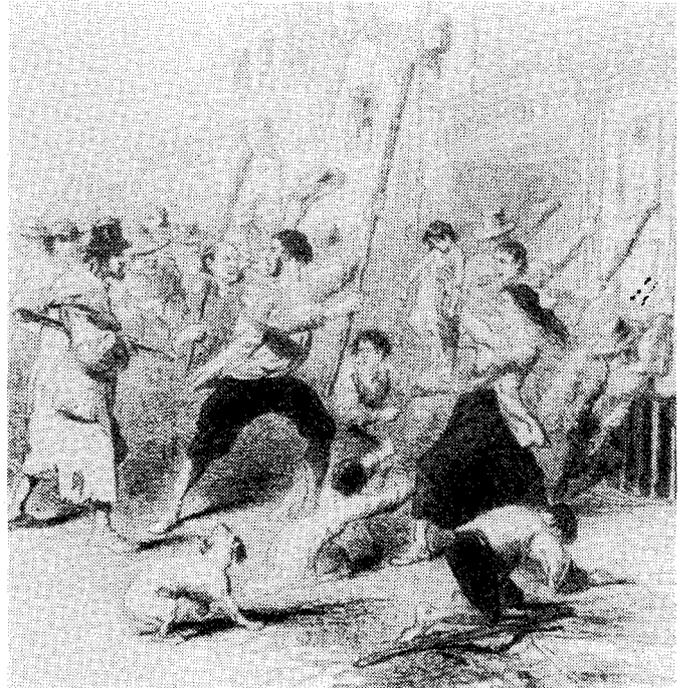
I cannot speak too highly of Private Windsor's behaviour during the whole transaction; although so suddenly attacked, and at once placed in a most disadvantageous and perilous position, he acted with a coolness and discretion that would have been creditable to him under the most favourable circumstances.

Had he met with assistance by the parties standing by, instead of opposition, he would have succeeded in capturing both the offenders, or at least would have taken measures sufficient to bring them hereafter to justice, and to his own spirited and manly conduct is to be attributed the saving of his life, and not only by his behaviour here, but by his behaviour heretofore, he has proved himself a good and brave soldier, as well as a trustworthy and efficient servant to the Board of Works.

On account of the feeling that may be expected from the people towards him in this particular district, it will decidedly not be safe for him to remain at his usual duties there, as heretofore; but as his removal after this occurrence would have a bad effect, in tending to encourage a similar course towards every upright and efficient superintendent, I would strongly recommend that the Board approve of an escort of constabulary being told off, to accompany him on all his visits, and that then he may be enabled to continue the services of a confidential superintendent in a district where they are so much required.

From the Same to the Same.**Limerick, December 31, 1846.**

Referring to my letter of the 29th instant, reporting an attack made upon Private Windsor, Royal Sappers and Minors, when visiting the Pullogh line of road, in the immediate vicinity of the town of Croom, I have to inform you, that I have attended a further investigation yesterday at Croom, before Mr. Goold, S.M., and other magistrates into the case, and there is very strong evidence to show that not only



Food riots in Dungarvan. Engraving, Pictorial Times, 10 October, 1846.

was the attack premeditated, but that a great proportion of the labourers of the line were engaged in the plot, if not all.

Viewing the matter, therefore, in this light, it appears the more desirable to make the punishment general. A petition has been drawn up to his Excellency, the Lord Lieutenant, by the 160 persons thrown out of employment of this line, praying that this offence may be overlooked, and that they may speedily be returned to their work.

For several reasons I would humbly suggest that this course be not adopted. The bad feeling towards the Board's officers is far more prevalent in that district than is expressed in the memorial, and I greatly fear that the slightest degree of conciliation in this instance would have a bad effect.

But as there may be amongst the number some few that are innocent, and who took no part directly or indirectly in the transaction, it appears to me desirable that a court of inquiry, consisting chiefly of the magistrates of the district and principle officers of the Board, should be held as soon as possible, and that very close investigation should be made, and that as many as can be satisfactorily proved not to have been in any way implicated, either through absence or other palpable causes, should be reinstated, and that the remainder should be suspended for such a length of time as the Board may be pleased to appoint.

On my visit to Croom, yesterday, I found the body of men thrown idle, occupying the streets of the town, and although perfect order and quiet prevailed amongst them, frequent threats were made, and hints purposely directed at me, that such a state of things would not long exist. Be that as it may, undoubtedly many are reduced to the last state of destitution, and unless speedy relief arrives in some shape or other, intense suffering will be felt.

I would beg further to request the opinion of the Board on the following subject, - whether it would be most desirable to remove Private Windsor from a district in which, unprotected, his life would be in constant danger, or whether to leave him for the present there with protection? I would strongly recommend the latter course, for in the first place, the services of a confidential superintendent are pre-eminently necessary in that particular district, and Private Windsor has proved himself especially efficient, and worthy of all confidence.

Secondly, his removal after this occurrence would tend to encourage similar attacks upon all the Board's upright and efficient officers.

An escort of constabulary could attend him on his visits to the works, and thus he would be enabled to continue as rigid a scrutiny as heretofore, without which, extensive frauds and excessive irregularities would continually be practised.

(British Parliamentary Papers, Famine [Ireland], Vol. 5, 1846.)