

'Potatoes and Providence': British Government Responses to the Great Famine

by Peter Gray

Writing in 1989, Cormac O Gráda commented that 'the history of the Irish famine is also British political history'.⁽¹⁾ Despite the obvious truth of this observation, there remains an absence, even from the most recent writing on the subject, of an awareness of significant developments in early nineteenth century British political history. This is particularly lamentable since such scholarship has touched on matters relating directly or indirectly to any evaluation of the response of British government to the Irish crisis, a subject central to the rejuvenated debate on the famine.⁽²⁾ In particular, British historians have dissected the party coalitions of the 'age of reform' and analysed political factions in terms of ideological divergences, have reopened the debate on the ideas and motivations underlying such central issues in British social and economic policy-making as the new poor law and the repeal of the corn laws, and, perhaps most importantly, have stressed the importance of religious-based concepts on social and economic perceptions and policies.⁽³⁾

Any analysis of the motivations behind British policy during the famine must take account of the political and intellectual milieu in which contemporary perceptions of the Irish situation were constructed, and the languages in which policy options were articulated and debated in the political world within and beyond Westminster. The 'high political' policy conflicts during the famine - often fiercest within party blocs - can be understood in part as a struggle for hegemony fought out between several competing languages. This paper will concentrate on what was arguably the most effective and powerful of such language - Christian providentialism - and in particular on its effectiveness in articulating the programmes for the reconstruction of Irish society that underlay much of relief policy. This approach will help illuminate one of the most difficult problems of the politics of the famine - the differences between the policies adopted by the Peel and Russell administrations.

It is not my intention to deny the importance of personal and party political manoeuvring, or of administrative



Sir Robert Peel.

pragmatism in the formation of policy. Rather, it is to suggest two considerations. Firstly, that the 'pragmatic' interpretation of government response, particularly as regards Peel's policy, has been overstated, and that the language employed in both public utterance and in private communications implies a more ideologically engaged response to the Irish catastrophe.

The second concerns the most

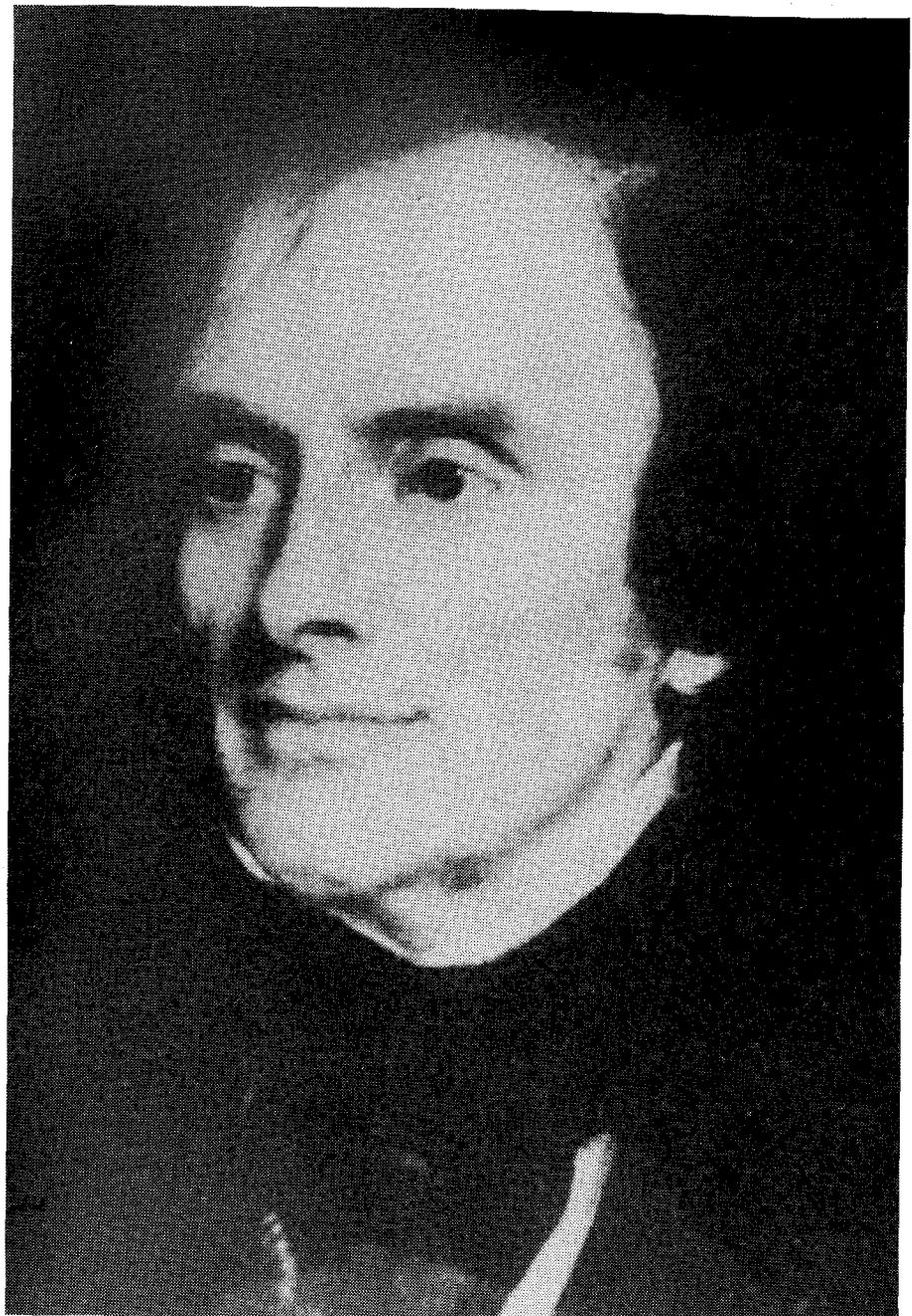
commonly assumed motivation for Whig-liberal policy from 1846. *Laissez-faire* is a demonstrably inaccurate description of its actions in all but food supply policy, and is a distraction from the real issue. Interventionism need not be solely philanthropic in intention and form, and in the 1840s frequently was not. 'Classical political economy' is also an inadequate scapegoat for the policy failures of the

Russell administration, for while its leading contemporary expositor, Nassau Senior, was closely connected with Whig-liberal politicians, his voice was frequently ignored, and he was to pen a stinging denunciation of government policy in 1849 by way of protest.⁽⁴⁾

Providentialism contributes a connecting thread to both these considerations. As a doctrine it can be summarized as the belief that all human affairs are regulated directly or indirectly by divine agency for human good. However, considerable differences of opinion existed as to the nature and mechanisms of divine action, and indeed on the definition of 'human good'. Providentialist conceptions were shared by a large proportion of the political élite of early nineteenth-century Britain, and were rooted in the predominantly evangelical ethos of that society between the French Revolution and the mid-Victorian boom beginning in the 1850s, a period described by Boyd Hilton as the 'age of atonement'.⁽⁵⁾ Providentialism was not a single coherent ideology, but a way of perceiving events in the natural world held in differing forms across the political and religious spectrum, from nonconformist radicals to the Ultra-Protestant reactionaries of the Albury group. It reflected the variety of evangelical experience and interacted in powerful and complex ways with aspects of classical political economy and other systems of ideas. Not all British policy makers and their advisers were subject to it - the classical political economists and their patrons tended towards a secularism inherited from Ricardo and Bentham - but arguably the most significant decisions of the *famine* period were made under the influence of providentialist thought. The explicit religious convictions of Charles Trevelyan are well known to most students of the Irish famine,⁽⁶⁾ but an understanding of the greater diffusion of providentialist attitudes, and the variety of responses they induced to the crisis of the 1840s, has hitherto been lacking.

Ideas of divine government ranged from a structural conception of the 'general' operation of providence through divinely ordained natural laws, to a belief in miraculous 'special' visitations to punish or correct individuals or nations. The broadest division within Anglican evangelicalism in the early nineteenth century was between 'moderate' post-millenarians, frequently associated with the Clapham sect, who usually expected providence to operate 'generally', and the more extreme pre-millenarian paternalists who eagerly awaited the apocalypse and interpreted natural and political crises as providential 'signs of the times'. Differing eschatologies pointed to differing social theories, but these distinctions were never absolute, and a number of evangelicals in each camp were aware of a degree of common ground.

Moderate providentialism was interrelated with the ideas of Christian political economy. Centred in the English and Scottish universities - and particularly



Lord John Russell: detail from a painting by F. Grant.

at Oxford - from the 1790s, Christian economists such as Chalmers, Sumner and Copleston had a profound influence on the upper echelons of a society saturated in the ideas of evangelical Protestantism. Concerned primarily with identifying the moral nature of economic laws - and with adapting the moral philosophy of Smithian economics to a Malthusian world - these writers urged government to remove artificial restrictions on economic life so as to reveal the operations of natural moral law. This, rather than the stimulation of economic growth, was the Christian rationale for *laissez-faire*. There were varieties and degrees within the world of Christian economics; Hilton has stressed the static, cyclical, purgative and retributive world view of 'moderate' evangelicalism, and linked this to the political ideology of liberal toryism.⁽⁷⁾ Yet it is clear that certain Whig-liberals and radicals were also infected by the

prevailing ethos and, while generally holding to a more benign or optimistic view of the 'natural economic law', also interpreted public events in the language of providentialism. Here, too, there were variations; Whately's neo-Paleyan Christian political economy was close to the secular thought of his friend and former student Nassau Senior. Whately believed that providence operated through a Smithian 'hidden hand', and hence thought state intervention in the economy both impious and counter-productive.⁽⁸⁾ At the other extreme, evangelical moralists like Charles Trevelyan, Sir George Grey and Charles Wood appear to have ignored the moderate mainstream of the 'canon' of Christian political economy. They combined a belief in a retributive yet beneficent providence with a resolutely non-Malthusian confidence in rapid economic progress and in the utility of state intervention to attain clearly defined moral ends. In the later 1840s it was this

group that was most successful in assembling a political coalition, cemented with providentialist justifications, powerful enough to enforce their Irish policy prescriptions.

The importance of the dissemination of such ideas throughout the body politic cannot be over-emphasised; both the increasingly professionalised Ricardian tradition of political economy, and the more radical popularised forms associated with the 'Manchester school', evolved parallel to the Christian tradition and were to some extent overshadowed by it. These three traditions often coalesced behind specific policy proposals - as was the case with the 1834 English poor law - but when orthodoxy and providentialism came into conflict, as was the case during the Irish famine, it was frequently the latter that emerged victorious.

II

The response of Sir Robert Peel's Conservative government to the 1845 potato failure has generally been praised by historians for its promptness and efficacy, although Woodham-Smith regretted that the Irish crisis had become mixed up with the question of the repeal of the corn laws.⁽⁹⁾ These issues were, however, 'indissolubly connected' (in the words of home secretary Sir James Graham), and the conjunction of the two was to be a major determinant of policy in the following years.⁽¹⁰⁾ The famine relief policy implemented in 1845-6 was not wholly new, but Peel was convinced that the 1845 failure was qualitatively different and infinitely more serious than previous crises, a national rather than a regional catastrophe, and that it required more than the customary public works relief.

Peel's claim in his memoirs that he had been compelled to act against agricultural protection as and when he did by 'that great and mysterious calamity' has been treated with understandable scepticism by historians.⁽¹¹⁾ Many other political and economic considerations were pushing him towards regarding the removal of protection as expedient by the mid 1840s. Yet if the threatened Irish famine is seen merely as a contingent opportunity and not as an imperative motivation to grasp the political nettle, the full significance of the episode will be missed. Moreover, the repeal of the corn laws was regarded by Peel as a vital pre-condition for the reconstruction of Irish society in a more 'natural' fashion than that revealed by the visitation of 1845.

On 15 August, 1845, before the ravages of the potato blight were observed, Graham wrote to Peel expressing his anxiety that, 'no law will be found easy to feed 25 millions crowded in a narrow space when Heaven denies the blessing of abundance. The question always returns, what is the legislation which most aggravates or mitigates this dispensation of Providence?'⁽¹²⁾ Graham's use of this terminology was more than a rhetorical device, as he was a man prone to apocalyptic alarms and pre-millenarian



'Height of Impudence'. Caricature from *Punch*, 12 October, 1846.
John Bull is accosted by a crude, hat-touching Irishman.

eschatology. The state of the harvest was a recurring concern, and he tended to regard bounty as a sign of specific providential action in the natural world. He revealed his vision of impending famine arising from the failure of the potato crop to Peel in a private letter of 18 October, 1845:

It is awful to observe how the Almighty humbles the pride of Nations. The Sword, the Pestilence and Famine are the instruments of his displeasure: the Canker-worm and the Locust are his armies, he gives the word: a single crop is blighted; and we see a Nation prostrate, stretching out its Hands for Bread. These are solemn warnings, and they fill me with reverence; they proclaim with a voice not to be mistaken, that 'doubtless there is a God who judgeth the Earth!'⁽¹³⁾

This pessimistic language was close to that of the 'extreme' evangelicals - many of them tory backwoodsmen - who tended to interpret the catastrophe either as a call to personal atonement for sins, or as a direct punishment against Irish Catholics and the British politicians who had connived at Popery through the augmentation of the Maynooth grant in 1845.⁽¹⁴⁾ However, Graham's interpretation was subsequently modified under the influence of his close political friend and mentor, Peel.

Peel's beliefs were rarely expressed

publicly, but his admiration for the theology of Bishop Sumner and Thomas Chalmers indicates an attraction to 'moderate' or 'rational' evangelicalism. Peel's providentialism reflected a more mechanistic and impersonal view of the workings of the Almighty, in which the blight could be seen as an instrument of divine mercy, not displeasure. The purposes of suffering included encouraging men to recognise the necessity of removing 'artificial' impediments to the operation of the natural laws of economic life.⁽¹⁵⁾ This concern is clear in his speeches to parliament during the corn law debates in 1846.

Peel and Graham's religious dispositions were different, but they were sufficiently close to reach a synthesis. The effect of Graham's alarms on the prime minister were noted and lamented by more sceptical cabinet colleagues. Under the influence of Peel's moderation, Graham came to regard the repeal of the corn laws as an act of national atonement. It is in this context that the language of 'mission' and the apparent desire for political martyrdom displayed by the ministers must be understood.⁽¹⁶⁾

This view of Peel's motivation has been forcefully argued by Hilton, and does not require further elaboration here. What can be added is the prime minister's success in expressing the case for linking the Irish situation and repeal in a language that appealed to liberal middle-class opinion.

Anti-Corn Law League meetings at the time were also stirred by providentialist rhetoric expressing moral revulsion against the corn laws. To the Unitarian W. J. Fox, famine was almost invariably the work of man in defiance of God's beneficence. 'Providence', he declared:

by the smallest of things often effects the greatest objects for the good of man, as is shown in the present instance, where a failure of the crop of the lowest vegetable in a small portion of the globe will provoke the occasion of the destruction of the mightiest monopoly that ever plundered humanity, or revelled in its sufferings.⁽¹⁷⁾

Peel's celebrated commons speech of 16 February, 1846, was characteristically less assertive of any certain knowledge of divine intention, but he explicitly challenged the 'extreme' evangelicals on his back-benches to reconsider their own pre-millenarian arguments and not to deny the merciful opportunity provided to remove 'every impediment to the free circulation of the Creator's bounty'.⁽¹⁸⁾

The Times pressed a similar case on its readers, arguing that what existed in Ireland was not a shortfall of potatoes but of cheap grain, and that the blame lay with the agricultural protectionists and landlords. *The Times* veered between 'moderate' and 'extreme' providentialist language, but as with Peel and Graham, it continually drew the same lesson; that while the crisis demanded individual atonement, it also called for public wisdom and virtue. Ironically, it appeared that the danger would be greater to England than to Ireland; the Irish, it was argued, would be saved by their 'habitual abstemiousness', but England could be saved only by holding firm to the laws of commerce, which Burke had described as 'the laws of nature, and consequently the laws of God'. Ireland's plight was to minister to England, but there were grounds for hope; the repeal of the corn laws would benefit Ireland, and in return England would overcome its understandable distaste for Irish ingratitude and corruption and rise to a higher moral plane through the giving of aid. That good would come from evil was implicit in the workings of providence.⁽¹⁹⁾ Peel's apparent public endorsement of such opinions from December, 1845, turned the paper from a constant critic into an enthusiastic supporter.

If the potato blight could be interpreted generally as a divine indictment of protection, and a warning to England delivered via the ministering agent of Ireland, it could also be seen as having specific reference to the structure of Irish society. Peel, in common with many English liberals, believed the state of Irish society to be fundamentally unsound, and held that the solution lay in a process of agrarian anglicisation. The causes of the country's social and economic problems were to be found in the inadequacies of its agricultural economy and in its archaic division of labour. He had long thought



Charles Trevelyan, the most senior civil servant at the *Treasury* in London.

that the future of British and Irish agriculture alike lay in capital and labour intensive scientific 'high-farming'. The removal of agricultural protection would, in his view, induce the landowners in both countries to shake off the moral lethargy of protectionism and adopt new methods, and would free the commercial capital required for such ventures. The potato failure induced Peel to abandon his preferred gradualist and didactic approach to such a policy.⁽²⁰⁾

Peel's Irish policy had thus far been concerned with changing Ireland from above - by winning the support of the Catholic hierarchy and bourgeoisie and providing educational facilities for these élites. The Devon Commission of 1843-5 was aimed primarily at stimulating improvement of estates by landowners. A growing consensus as to the 'degeneracy' of the potato and the unpredictable novelty of the blight in 1845-6 now pointed to the need to reconstruct Ireland from below.

Playfair, the scientific commissioner, privately suggested the providential possibilities presented by the crisis in November; if the dietary habits of the peasantry were altered, 'it would go a great way to improve their social and therefore their political habits'.⁽²¹⁾ *The Times* meanwhile, launched a critique of potato subsistence in Ireland which owed less to the cold logic of orthodox political economy than to moralistic outrage against those it deemed responsible for such an 'unnatural' state of society. In October and November, 1845, leader after leader castigated the potato as a crop and those who exploited mass subsistence upon it. Diet was the benchmark of civilisation, and those dependent on the potato were in a debased and savage state, equalling that of the 'untutored Indian' and the 'ocean islander'. Providence intended that civilized man live on foodstuffs of a higher order - defined less in terms of nutrition than of viability as a commercial good.⁽²²⁾

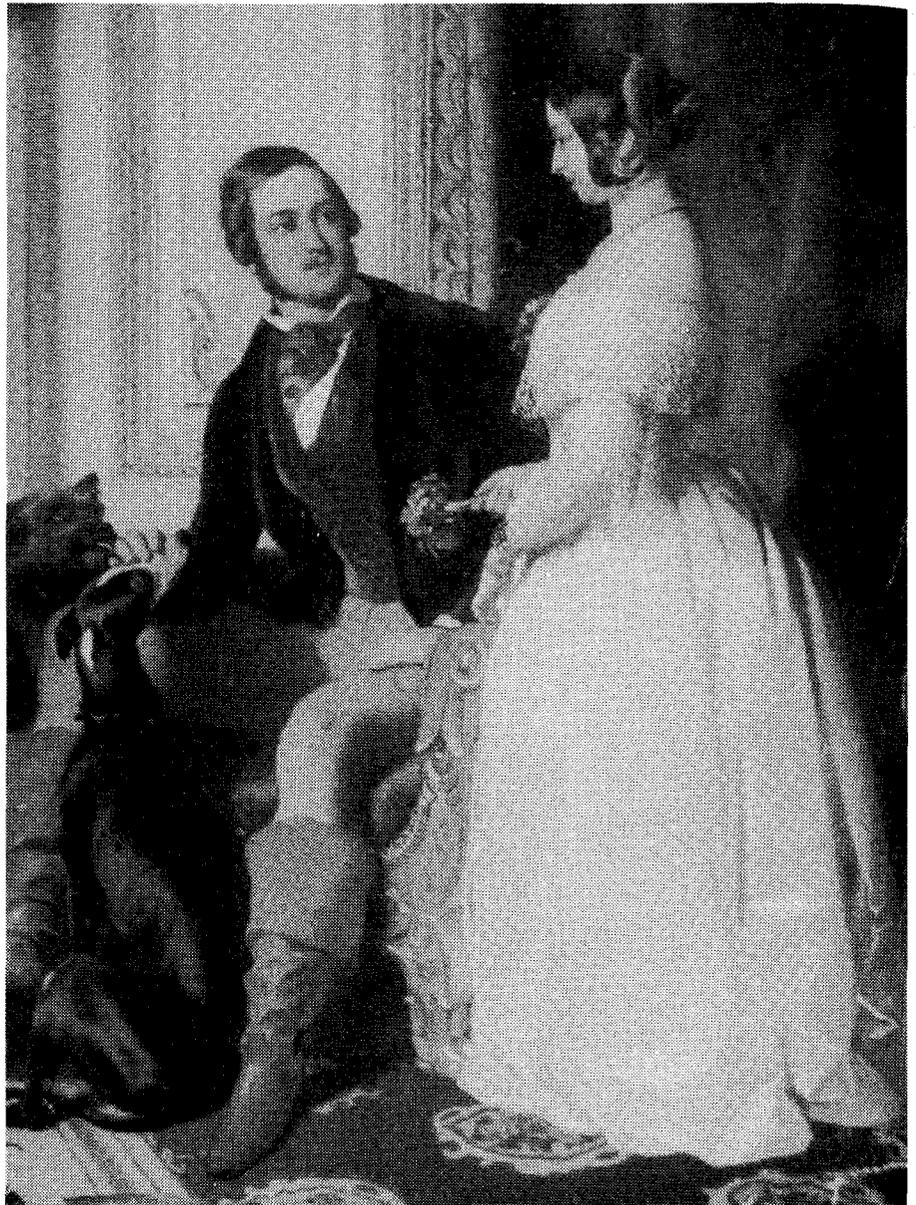
Peel endorsed such ideas on introducing the Corn Bill. He told the commons:

I wish it were possible to take advantage of this calamity for introducing among the people of Ireland the taste for a better and more certain provision for their support, than that which they have hitherto cultivated; and thereby diminishing the chances to which they will be constantly, I am afraid, liable, of recurrences of this great and mysterious visitation, by making potatoes the ordinary food of millions of our fellow subjects.⁽²³⁾

He was, however, careful to avoid the impression that the necessary transition could be attained overnight. A time-scale of two to three years was proposed, similar to that envisaged for English agricultural transition from full protection to the rigours of free trade in wheat, and fiscal concessions and credits were granted to Irish property greater than those offered to England. Responsibility for the transition was, however, to rest primarily with the landed proprietors.

The idea of free trade was popular with Irish radicals. Daniel O'Connell and Sharman Crawford shared the belief that the chief result of the removal of protection would be a large and immediate fall in the price of grain resulting from large-scale importations into Britain from abroad. This fall would allow the Irish poor to consume the produce of their own soil, as was already to some extent the case in the oatmeal-consuming north. Along with English radicals they believed that any immediate loss of income involved could and should be borne by the landlords in the shape of sharply reduced rentals. This view was completely at odds with Peel and Graham's vision; indeed the latter declared that he had no regrets over any rise of Irish food exports to England, as this was the only means whereby Ireland could accumulate wealth and improve its modes of production. Peel's hope was that the Irish masses would live mostly on imported maize - the 'lowest' and cheapest grain.⁽²⁴⁾ Neither minister believed free trade would lead to a collapse in corn prices. This division illustrates a more fundamental rift over the envisaged future of Irish society. Where O'Connell favoured the prevalence of secure smallholders living largely off their own produce, Peel looked to the proletarianization of the smallholder and conacre peasant, who would henceforth live on imported maize purchased from wages.

Indian corn was not an entirely unknown commodity in Ireland, but previous imports had been small and intended for temporary food aid only.⁽²⁵⁾ Peel's attention was drawn to the subject by commissary-general Hewetson, who declared maize 'the cheapest substitute for the potato, equally, if not more substantially, nutritious, and as simple in its mode of preparation'.⁽²⁶⁾ One of the



Queen Victoria and Albert, from Landseer's painting, Windsor Castle in Modern Times.

most striking aspects of the government's activity in distributing the 20,000 tons of maize it imported in 1845-6, was the long-term view of their operations taken by its officers. Most not only agreed with Peel that maize should be permanently integrated into the Irish economy, but felt a sense of mission in forwarding this end. Commissary-general Routh hoped that 'as a food the potato will never be what it had been, nor can the people ever place the same confidence in its growth. It will in time resume its proper station as a vegetable, and cease to be a staple article of food'.⁽²⁷⁾ The social consequences of this were considerable; Edward Cardwell quoted Routh's letter in the commons and endorsed its sentiments:

If, while they diffused amongst [the Irish] a taste for a higher kind of food, they could also introduce amongst them habits of industry and improvement calculated to furnish them with the means of procuring that higher food, they would be effecting one of the greatest practical improvements which this

country was capable of accomplishing. Even in the most afflicting dispensations of Providence there was ground for consolation, and often even occasion for congratulation.⁽²⁸⁾

I have stressed the providentialist response to the first potato failure and its close relationship to the corn law crisis because the events and ideas of 1845-6 went far to determine responses in the following years. Much of Peel's relief policy in this season was transitional; intervention was strictly temporary, to tide Ireland over until the full benefits of opening the ports could be realised. It does not follow that after June, 1846, Peel would have been any less rigid over food policy than Russell, and for much the same reasons. This was admitted by Lord Lincoln, outgoing Conservative chief secretary and one of Peel's most loyal lieutenants, in the response he made to Russell's declaration of Irish policy in August, 1846. Lincoln declared his full support for the intentions of the new administration not to interfere with the

private food trade, on the grounds that the circumstances which had made this expedient before had now very materially altered. If the government was to continue to import provisions the result would be a paralysis of trade and a disruption of the private exertions on which Ireland must depend for its permanent reliance.⁽²⁹⁾

This is not to say that there was no significant difference between the relief policies of Peel's and Russell's governments, but to indicate that the discontinuities were limited. The Russell government inherited and largely endorsed the reconstructive elements of Peelite policy. Peel and Goulburn were consulted privately before the introduction of the new relief legislation of August 1846, but made little comment except for Peel's concern that any renewal of intervention risked stamping 'a character of permanency on a relief which was only tolerated from the hope of its being casual and temporary'.⁽³⁰⁾ His disquiet increased with the following months and years, but he refrained from public criticism until 1849. Peel's prime objection was less the failure of Whig-liberal policy to meet humanitarian objectives than its flawed reconstructive dimension and the great outbursts of early 1849, in which he demanded that parliament adopt a radically altered relief mechanism, were dictated largely by the latter concern.

III

Peel's attitudes can be contrasted with the rival tradition of providentialist exegesis current in Whig-liberal and radical circles. The question of providential intent was raised yet more starkly in the wake of the near absolute potato catastrophe of 1846. Protection having been removed, attention was directed towards more straightforward Irish targets for this demonstration of the divine will. Again, 'unnatural' structures and attitudes struck Whiggish and radical minds in Britain as the most likely foci. Reconstructionist demands flourished in the press, and reached their apogee of articulation in Trevelyan's *The Irish Crisis*. This pamphlet triumphantly (and somewhat prematurely) proclaimed the government's success in correctly apprehending the divine desire to eradicate the old potato-based social structure of Ireland, and defended the adoption of a suitable policy.⁽³¹⁾

Trevelyan, for long the *bete noire* of many accounts of the famine, has too often been seen in isolation from his political context. It was the influx of a group of similarly minded men into office in 1846 that empowered him, and he is best regarded as a part of this 'liberal moralist' ideological bloc. Charles Wood, as chancellor of the exchequer and Trevelyan's direct superior, was the central figure, and drew support from Lord Grey and Sir George Grey in the cabinet. For Wood, the potato failure was the necessary harbinger of a 'social revolution in Ireland' which rendered any return to the *status quo ante* 1845 impossible as well as undesirable. It was



Lord Grey, the Colonial Secretary.

the responsibility of government to prepare Ireland for this transformation by stamping out the 'present habits of dependence', and obliging Irish property to support Irish poverty. The moral impetus behind Wood's views came from his conviction that the Irish catastrophe was not accidental but willed: 'A want of food and employment is a calamity sent by Providence', he wrote to the lord lieutenant - it had 'precipitated things with a wonderful impetus, so as to bring them to an early head'. While famine might entail considerable short-term suffering, the divine intention was merciful - the new Ireland would be free of rack-renting, poverty and agrarian outrage. Conversely, any failure on the part of Irish landlords and tenants to meet the moral obligations now placed upon them was impious and intolerable.⁽³²⁾ To Wood, the government was merely the agent and not the initiator of these sanctions.

The moralists were never the dominant faction in Russell's government, but it was they who held the policy-making initiative

and who were entrenched in the Treasury. They were to prove themselves adept at manipulating the weakness of other cabinet factions to attain their own ends. Russell's Foxite antipathy towards Irish landlords was encouraged and exploited in the campaign to make that class bear simultaneously the brunt of the costs of relief and regeneration. On the other hand, the rigid economic orthodoxy of Landsdowne and the 'moderate' liberals, and of Peel and his supporters in parliament, was called into play to stymie the alarming tendencies of Russell and Bessborough towards heterodoxy on such matters as waste-land reclamation, railway development and tenant-right. The prime minister's vision of a programme of 'comprehensive measures' to facilitate Irish social transition collapsed ignominiously in the face of savage cabinet infighting and parliamentary obstruction.

Perhaps the moralists' greatest strength was their ability to manipulate the idea of providential visitation. Such ideas could be held in greater or lesser

degrees, but in the conditions of panic and confusion induced by the Irish crisis and later supplemented by British economic instability in 1847-9, and by European conflagration and domestic agitation in 1848, moralist ideologues held the advantage of absolute confidence in their own beliefs. The Treasury bloc received the fervent support of *The Times*. Indeed, this was actively cultivated by moralist ministers, who were well aware of widespread British restiveness over heavy relief expenditure, and were ready to play the populist card to bolster their political position.⁽³³⁾ The willingness of the government as a whole in early 1847 to proclaim a national day of fast and humiliation, and to issue a Queen's letter to raise a charitable fund through the clergy, ultimately strengthened the moralist case that the Irish crisis was providentially determined.⁽³⁴⁾ The national fast was welcomed by the clergy and press, was widely observed, and produced much of the £435,000 raised by the British Association relief fund.⁽³⁵⁾ Yet this generosity was accompanied by 'mixed and varying feelings'; there was a popular expectancy that Ireland would be not merely preserved but transformed in such a way as to render further assistance unnecessary.⁽³⁶⁾ As with the Scottish Highlands relief funds, Trevelyan quickly took advantage of this ambiguity to establish covert Treasury control over the Irish fund, which was used to promote the moralist social vision.⁽³⁷⁾

It would be wrong to conclude that the moralists had everything their own way in 1846-7. Bessborough in particular, and the Irish relief administrators generally, put up considerable resistance to attempts to reduce the mechanisms of relief to the 'penal test' desired by Trevelyan. But with the virtual collapse of the public works system under the weight of unprecedented levels of destitution, and the rejection of Bessborough's alternative of a labour rate, the initiative passed to them. Moralists embraced first the soup kitchen mechanism and then the poor law primarily as opportunities to enforce just such moral tests - against both the 'undeserving poor' and the irresponsible owners of Irish property.⁽³⁸⁾ Increasingly convinced of the fecklessness of both, Wood looked to a harsher policy that would punish lack of exertion with starvation in the case of the former, and with confiscation in that of the latter. 'Except through a purgatory of misery and starvation', he wrote in July, 1847, 'I cannot see how Ireland is to emerge into a state of anything approaching to quiet or prosperity'.⁽³⁹⁾

The extended poor law was of mixed ideological parentage. Strongly supported by Wood and Grey, who promoted it as a necessary concession to British public opinion, it was presented by Russell on the grounds that it would extend the right of relief to the poor.⁽⁴⁰⁾ Landsdowne and other moderate liberals resented it, but acquiesced in the face of its undoubted popularity and after promises of auxiliary

measures that would lift the burden of relief from the rates. Peel similarly gave way in return for the Land Improvement Act, despite his long-standing resistance to out-door relief on the rates. Outside the government, orthodox liberals like Monteagle, Whately and Senior denounced it as disastrous. In the absence or failure of the promised auxiliaries, it was they who were ultimately vindicated.

Events in the summer and autumn of 1847 combined to alter British perceptions of the Irish crisis and bolstered the moralist position. The blight 'showed its teeth without biting too hard' into the already much reduced potato harvest.⁽⁴¹⁾ Questions continued to hang over the viability of the potato, but there appeared to be no specific visitation, and a bumper grain crop was accompanied by the collapse of the price of imported grains. Trevelyan's argument that the famine was technically over seemed to have convinced much of the British public, as the second national day of fast for Ireland was widely ignored and contributions to the British Association fund declined sharply.⁽⁴²⁾

A further event changing the climate of opinion was the British banking crisis and financial crash of October, 1847. A recent survey of this crisis stresses the great importance of the balance of payments crisis and price collapse caused by the massive grain imports of 1847; this was observed by contemporaries and taken as a further argument against interference in Ireland.⁽⁴³⁾ That the interests of England should predominate over those of Ireland during such a crisis was axiomatic, particularly if responsibility could be pinned on Irish proprietors for creating the situation in the first place. Providential lessons could also be drawn from the banking crisis and the following industrial recession, chiefly against the evils of government overspending. Wood's argument had always been that the principle of using policy as a coercive mechanism to stimulate enterprise was more important than the question of cost, but it is difficult not to detect a note of glee in his letters of 1847-8 telling Clarendon, the increasingly frustrated and angry viceroy, that no more money could be made available. On 15 August, 1847, he wrote:

Now financially, my course is very easy. I have no more money and therefore I cannot give it ... Where the people refused to work or sow, they must starve, as indeed I fear must be the case in many parts. Ellice says that all our difficulties arise from the impious attempt to thwart the dispensation which was sent to cut the Gordian Knot in Ireland; and I believe that this must be the end of it.⁽⁴⁴⁾

Ironically, the chancellor's hand was further strengthened by the defeat of the 1848 budget, which had included a substantial increase in British income tax to meet the weight of Irish and defence expenditure, and which had been

personally supervised by Russell. The prevailing economic circumstances stirred the 80 or so radicals returned in the 1847 general election into open rebellion against a demoralised and divided government.⁽⁴⁵⁾

The lesson that providence required that Ireland be left to the operation of 'natural causes' thus appeared to dominate government policy by 1848-49. Clarendon's outbursts against an 'extermination' policy, and Russell's half-hearted threats of resignation failed to shift a Treasury group confident of the support of the bulk of British middle class opinion.⁽⁴⁶⁾ This consensus - that the renewed famine of 1848 and after was a further judgement of God, but that it was of a different order and with a different meaning to that of 1845-6 - was best articulated in *The Times*. To the paper, the availability of cheap grain made the famine 'partial', and Ireland's aggregate wages fund, called out by the poor law and redistributed by the rate-in-aid, was sufficient to feed the destitute.⁽⁴⁷⁾ There was an element of rationalisation in this; privately the editor of *The Times* agreed with Charles Greville that British 'disgust ... at the state of Ireland and the incurable madness of her people', now rendered mass starvation inevitable.⁽⁴⁸⁾

IV

In conclusion, what distinguished the providentialism of Peel from that of the moralists? Superficially the answer appears straightforward - a difference of opinion over the Irish wages fund. Wood and Trevelyan believed it axiomatic that the destitute population could be supported and the economy reconstructed simultaneously by drawing on this fund. Like many radicals, and indeed Russell himself, they believed the latent wealth of the land could be extracted from the landowners by means of public policy.

Peel, in contrast, was pessimistic as to the size of the wages fund, and continued to believe that some transitional aid would be necessary. His 1849 proposal of a special commission for Connaught with powers to undertake infrastructural works and to promote emigration was aimed not at saving the Irish landowning class, but at preserving the value of Irish landed property. He agreed with Wood that 'free trade in land' was necessary for the full realisation of the free trade vision of 1846, but held that this would be frustrated by an untrammelled draining of the wages fund.⁽⁴⁹⁾

This difference over the wages fund reflected a deeper division over economic growth. Moralists were deeply anti-Malthusian, believing that the resources for growth were unlimited, and required only the stimulus of moral exertion. Philosophical optimism underlay this outlook. 'Progressive improvement in agriculture', Lord Grey commented in 1844, was 'the law of human society'; it would 'always go on if not arrested by violence'.⁽⁵⁰⁾

Peel's more pessimistic world view was

typical of the liberal tory evangelicalism that stressed equilibrium rather than progress. It involved a vision of the operations of providence that tended to look to the sins of self rather than to those of others for the cause of visitation. Peel shared with Thomas Chalmers a belief that the continuing Irish crisis was judgement on the whole United Kingdom and not just on Ireland, and that the burden should be equalised and sacrifices made by all.⁽⁵¹⁾ The providentialist rhetoric he employed in 1849 to justify the plantation scheme was thus inclusive and looked to the events of 1845-9 as a whole:

It has pleased God to afflict us with a great calamity - which may, perhaps, be improved into a blessing, if it awakens us to a due sense of the danger which threatens us: without this warning, we might have gone on from year to year, with little thought of the future; still trusting in one precarious root for the subsistence of millions ... Let us now profit by this solemn warning - let us deeply consider whether 'out of this nettle, danger, we may not pluck the flower, safety' - and convert a grievous affliction into a means of future improvement and a source of future security.⁽⁵²⁾

By 1849, however, Peel's vision carried little weight with a government and a British public opinion happy to blame Ireland and the Irish for their own fate.



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