THE GREAT IRISH FAMINE 1845-1852: IMAGES AND INTERPRETATIONS OF GOVERNMENT RELIEF POLICY

I – Irish Famine Historiography: Context and Ideology

The period to be assessed here has many titles: Famine, Starvation and Hunger – to offer a few. Similarly, the date of the event is ambiguous. For simplicity’s purpose, it shall be called The Irish Famine or Famine: 1845-52. The British Government shall be referred to as ‘Government’ and ‘British government’, throughout.

The differences in interpretation are both modern and contemporary. Many historical works focus on the effects of the potato blight and the years that followed such as Cecil Woodham-Smith’s The Great Hunger and Christine Kinealy’s This Great Calamity. Such works, loaded down with detail, evidence and information give little insight into how the Famine, as we shall call it, actually occurred and how it is remembered. These authors suggest reasons for the Famine but fail to fully answer many of the most interesting questions. This is true with many of the ‘responsive histories’ where information is only partially explained: Focusing ‘blame’ upon a distinctive group for the horrors of the Famine period by failing to fully explain it. Such is the problem with accessible history. As Mary Daly pointed out: ‘The Famine experience does not lend itself to simple conclusions’. Nonetheless, some authors produce conclusive histories throughout Irish History such as the nationalist view of John Mitchell that has been readily accepted amongst much of the Irish diaspora worldwide. Recently, modern writers such as Christine Kinealy have intensified this view. To suggest that Kinealy wrote A Death-Dealing Famine merely to sell to a receptive audience would be an insult to her academic talents. Nonetheless, it is hard to imagine that Famine histories would be published if they were unlikely to be purchased by the American public. The intention, in this chapter, is to view the Famine by economic means using both the economic interpretations of the 1840s against the economic-historical interpretations of the twentieth century. Further interpretation will come later.

As has been mentioned above, the Famine has been tagged with different names over the last 150 years. Even the Gaelic name, An Gorta Mor, raises questions over the term’s meaning, emphasising its roots within the Celtic peoples of Ireland. Identifying a historical event that affected the Gaelic peoples of Ireland, exclusively. Kinealy, for example, concludes her 1997 work with a chapter entitled ‘A Policy of Extermination’ referring to the genocidal interpretation of the Irish Famine. Similarly, The Great Starvation is a term readily used amongst the Irish-Americans of today, most impressively within the ‘Holocaust and Genocide Curriculum’ at secondary level. The difference between ‘Famine’ and ‘Subsistence Crisis’ may seem paradoxical at first, but there are major differences between the two: Joel Mokyr, Cormac Ó Gráda and Amartya Sen each identify differences between a Famine and a subsistence crisis; largely singing from the same hymn sheet. Therefore, the

1 Mary E Daly, The Famine in Ireland (Dundalk, 1986) hereafter Daly, p.116
controversy that surrounds this chapter is that of the context and ideology with which the Famine is interpreted.

The question of Famine or Subsistence Crisis is intended to fuel the debate. Both Mokyr and Ó Gráda have applied the theories of Amartya Sen as published in *Poverty and Famines*, to the Irish case with varying degrees. Both authors are confident, as is Mary Daly, with the Entitlement approach. The main bulk of Sen's argument is that Famines are not caused by the failure of food supply but by the economic conditions that surround them. As he points out:

> Starvation is the characteristic of some people not *having* enough food to eat. It is not the characteristic of there *being* not enough food to eat.²

The examples that Sen uses are that of the Bengali famine of 1943 and the Ethiopian famine of 1974, amongst others. The differences between these two famines are stark. The Bengal economy was in boom, whilst that of Ethiopia was in slump.³ Nevertheless, they both resulted in starvation for a vast number of the population in those locations. A similar application of his theories can be made to the Irish Famine.

Sen’s theories rely upon the application of economic ideas to these famines: Entitlements and Exchange Entitlements and their influence upon the possibility of Starvation as a result of a drop in either. Although the computations of Sen’s economics are quite complex, the formula is simple: A person in an economy has certain legal entitlements that are derived from his exchange entitlements. That is, what commodity he legally has a right to, will determine what he is legally entitled to trade for. For example, a farmer has both labour and produce that he may trade for other commodities or services; this may be done directly, barter, or indirectly; as a cash payment. If there is a drop in demand for either his labour or produce, the farmer may starve. If there is a drop in his produce crop or he is unable to work, a similar possibility might occur. Each person has an Exchange Entitlement relevant to his or her professional or social status in a non-directed economy. Thus, the risk of starvation is the inability to establish food entitlement: The 'availability of the food is not directly involved'.⁴ The starvation tag can easily be replaced with another. Indeed, Sen uses both famine and starvation interchangeably. This simple formula is also affected by the accessibility to social security. In modern western countries, such as the UK or United States, starvation would be prevalent with unemployment as high as it is without the modern social security system.⁵

Most histories have viewed the Famine as a subsistence crisis, maintaining that there was a decline in food availability. However, Sen argues that

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³ Sen, p.164
⁴ Sen, p.8
⁵ Sen, p.6-7
famines flourish even where there is no general decline in food. Furthermore, this view does not explain the relationship of people to food and tells little of starvation. In short, the Food Availability Decline approach is 'Delphic in its reticence'. The argument that most histories take is that the food available within Ireland was less than that required to feed the population. This was so because of the potato failure and because exports continued throughout the famine. Sen’s interpretation is that even if there were sufficient food within a famine affected area, the people with the most need for these commodities could not necessarily afford to purchase it. If the value of a person’s Entitlement Exchange is great, food availability in a subsistence crisis is not necessarily a problem. For example, with reference to the 1816-1818 famine, the *Irish Farmers Journal* blamed ‘the want of employment as the chief cause’, not the scarcity of available food. A parliamentary committee concluded similarly with reference to the 1822 famine. As suggested, it is doubtful whether those most affected by phytophthora infestans could afford replacement food for the potato. Even if, as the *Evening Mail* pointed out, there was sufficient food harvested ‘to feed double the number of people actually existing in Ireland for a period of twelve months’. As has been pointed out, the crop failures from 1845 did not guarantee there would be a famine. Famine occurs, according to Sen, because there is a ‘shortage of income and purchasing power’. The economic situation for those most affected by the potato blight will be investigated later but it will be viewed using Sen’s Entitlement approach. Indeed, there was a severe subsistence crisis in one crop over the period but the failure of the potato does not explain the ‘horrors’ that were to be reported later.

On the surface, Sen’s ideas that famine can persist without a shortage of food, endorsed by many Irish History writers, certainly reinforces the nationalist history of the Famine. Food was not scarce in Ireland; it was exported by the shipload throughout the famine period. John Mitchell went so far as to say: ‘Ireland was actually producing sufficient food, wool and flax, to feed and clothe not nine but eighteen millions of people’. However, for every ship to arrive in Ireland importing foodstuffs, it was ‘to meet six ships sailing out with a similar cargo’. In George Bernard Shaw’s *Man and Superman*, it is the export of goods from Famine affected areas that are criticised. Malone sees the period 1845-1850 as *The Starvation*. Moreover, in this Irish-American view, a famine is the absence of foodstuffs. In the ‘plenty’ of 1840s agricultural Ireland the period could be described as nothing short of a forced starvation:

When a country is full [of] food, and exporting it, there can be no famine. Me father was starved dead; and I was

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6 Sen, p.154  
8 Ó Gráda, P.123  
9 Sen, P.156  
10 Ó Gráda, p.68  
starved out to America in me mother’s arms. English rule
drove me and mine out of Ireland.12

Such condemnations of the ‘English’, its government and ‘its’ landlords are
endemic of the Diaspora’s view.

The Famine Diary typifies such views; a work of Irish-Canadian fiction sold as
a true diary account of the emigration of ‘Black 47’. The opinions contained
within this fiction are extremely nationalistic. Although it is now rejected as a
primary source, its importance as a secondary source should not be
underestimated. Its publication and success indicates a strong desire ‘to
wallow in [the Famine’s] emotional horrors, perhaps at the cost of wider
understanding’.13 Irish-American influences are at the forefront of Irish History.
As much of the material is intended for an American audience, the reader of
any work is in a precarious position concerning the reading of such material.
For exports, although export figures may be statistically inaccurate, it is not
their accuracy that should be questioned as all statistics have some faults.
Instead, what should be questioned is the omission of certain statistics, such
as import statistics alongside them: It is true that Ireland exported during the
famine but she became a net Importer of grain over the same period.14
Kinealy’s Death Dealing Famine ignores this fact entirely, for example. As a
result, whilst Sen’s economic interpretation lends itself to a nationalist view of
events, the export/import argument might not give a definitive conclusion to
the accusation that the population would have had sufficient food within
Ireland to feed itself had exports been prohibited.

What is relatively new to mainstream interpretation and imagery of the Irish
Famine is the question of Genocide that has been introduced by American
academics such as Seamus Metress and has entered United States
classrooms by way of the Irish Famine Curriculum Committee as part of the
New Jersey Commission on Holocaust Education. There are several
questions that should be raised before embarking on an investigation of the
‘genocidal’ nature of the Irish Famine: Firstly, where has this suggestion come
from? Secondly, should it be viewed as a valid historical argument or as an
American-Irish nationalist response to later historical events that occurred in
Nazi Germany? Finally, is such an argument in any way valid? These
questions must be answered first before one can consider delving further into
the issue of ‘genocide’.

The term genocide makes many an historian uneasy. This accusation made
against government, institution or person is extreme and must not be voiced
without conclusive judgement. The argument stems from the actions and
inactions of the government authority in control of Ireland during the Famine
period. Although it will be referred to as the Government or British
government, the UK Government is a more appropriate term given the 1800
Act of Union. However, in consideration of the quagmire of historical

12 George Bernard Shaw, Man and Superman, hereafter Shaw, Act IV, v.56
13 Mary E. Daly, ‘Revisionism and Irish History: The Great Famine’, in D. G. Boyce and A. O’Day
14 Ó Gráda, p.123
interpretation, the first term is most beneficial to these considerations. In addition, whilst there might be a case for the suggestion of genocide some historians see it as an answer to the Jewish Holocaust for Irish descendants in the US and Canada, becoming a symbol of national unity: evidence that the Irish are a nation of victims too. The validity of the genocide argument is complex: It relies upon suspicion, misinformation and modern views of political and economic morality. The general argument is that the British government's actions, inactions and adherence to laissez-faire economic thought resulted in the death or emigration of half of the Irish population between 1845-52. The Irish-American anthropologist, Seamus Metress, postulates the accusation of genocide thus:

It is time for us to stop using the euphemism 'Irish potato famine' for two reasons. First, it is wrong because there was no shortage of food in Ireland. Secondly, it was not simply an 'Irish famine' but a starvation based on systematic British exploitation of the Irish people, inaction in the face of the potato crop failure, and a vindictive, racist attitude toward the Irish.

The interpretation of the term ‘genocide’ should thus focus its attention on food availability, the notion of colonial exploitation, Government action as a result of the famine and the perception of the Irish people by the British. The terms ‘Genocide’ and ‘Starvation in Ireland’ are intrinsically linked and should thus be addressed together. To what extent the Government was responsible for the Irish Famine will be viewed with reference to the condition of the Irish people using Sen’s entitlement approach.

15 Boyce, p.71
16 Seamus Metress, ‘The Great Starvation and British Imperialism in Ireland’, The Irish People, 10 January 1996
II – Famine: Causes and Interpretation

The Irish population at the time of the 1841 census was recorded at 8.2 million persons.\(^\text{17}\) Scholars are agreed that the population increased from the mid-eighteenth century but the exact figures for population rise and growth rates are disputed. For the majority of the pre-famine period, there are poor records for population and an almost complete absence before 1780. However, it is generally noted that the population increases were comparable with England for the one hundred years to the Famine. During these one hundred years, Ireland and Britain became increasing politically and economically integrated against the backdrop of rapid population growth.\(^\text{18}\) For the period to 1821, Ireland maintained an average annual growth rate of 1.2 per cent that was faster than anywhere else in Europe, according to Kenneth H Connell who rejected the majority of estimates based upon hearth tax data.\(^\text{19}\) Connell’s *The Population of Ireland* has remained the authoritative work on population growth, before the first census in 1821, for the last fifty years. Although it has been questioned as being too radical in its rejection of taxation data and its growth figures prior to 1821, most historians agree that the population trends identified by Connell are accurate.

Population figures from 1821 to the famine period are similarly disputed. The 1821 and 1841 census figures of 6.8 million and 8.2 million suffer from under enumeration, to a degree. Similarly, it is suggested that the 1831 census figure of 7.8 million suffers from over enumeration. The population growth rate between 1831 and 1841 has been placed at between one half and three quarters of a per cent but claims that population increase had halted by 1841 have been disregarded due to these source problems.\(^\text{20}\) Despite its shortcomings, the 1841 census is the best source for pre-Famine population. The large increase in population from approximately 1750 to the Famine fits the Food Availability Decline interpretation of famine causality. This method suggests that the large increase in population resulted in a scarcity of food for the population of 1840s Ireland. However, it is unclear to what extent this is an accurate representation of the relationship between population increase and food availability.

Thomas Malthus interprets famine as a ‘positive check’ to curb rapid population increase but does not explain the explicate cause of over-population in Ireland’s case because his work is a general one. The Irish population increased as a result of many factors, according to Mokyr and Ó Gráda. Statistically, the population growth rates can be explained by the association of birth rate, death rate, age at marriage, improvements in health provision and, as a result, infant and adult mortality. Connell and Mokyr explain that the rapid population growth that began in the eighteenth century did not continue at the same rate up to the Famine. The increase in population growth for the period prior to 1821 offers poor data. Admittedly, it is clear that

\(^{17}\) S. J. Connolly (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to Irish History* (Oxford, 1999), p.454
\(^{19}\) Mokyr and Ó Grada, p.475
\(^{20}\) Mokyr and Ó Grada, p.477
population grew significantly to 1821 but the actual numbers are conjectural. The conjectural nature of these population studies does not infer their inaccuracy, merely that the total figures have been extrapolated from a limited number of reliable sources. There is a complex correlation between the Average Age at Marriage for women (AAM), a woman’s natural fertility and the Birth Rate. Additional issues that are hard to resolve intensify this complex correlation. Poor eighteenth-century data does not rule out early marriage being the ‘norm’ and the AAM probably increased from between twenty and twenty-two at the beginning of the nineteenth-century to 24.6 years in 1840. A later age at marriage would affect the fertility of the Irish population, decreasing the number of children within each family unit. Despite the increase in the AAM, marital fertility in 1840 was still exceptionally high. For example, the number of children below five years was sixty-seven per cent higher than in England in 1841.21

This statistical computation does not, however, explain the impetus of the population growth that affected Ireland over the period. Mathematics tells us nothing of why the population increased prior to the famine. Nor does it explain why the growth rate began to decline prior to the famine: The population growth before 1821 has been estimated at 1.5 per cent using figures extrapolated from the age distribution of the 1821 census but between 1821 and 1841 this had dropped to 0.9 per cent.22 Connell offered the cause of population increase as an increase in Mean Household Size; the number within each family had risen to 5.65 in 1788.23 Although the actually figures are disputed by Mokyr and Ó Gráda, the trend in family size growth appears accurate. The explanation for this increase and subsequent decrease was the desirability for large families – it indicates a low age at marriage and suggests a decline in celibacy. The absence of any social security system within Ireland in the pre-Famine period required children for old age and made large families desirable. This is in contrast to the Malthusian view that argues that social security encourages large families. In Ireland, the opposite appears to be true. As a result of cheap commodities and land availability there was only a ‘marginal cost of feeding another mouth’.24 Until at least 1838, there was an absence of any effective poor-relief: ‘a man and woman’s only insurance against old age was their children’.25

This marginal cost can be identified by the stability of the potato and the Gaelic tradition of land sub-division from father to sons. Attempts by landlords to halt the subdivision of land from about 1815 were heavily opposed by the rural population and such traditions did not change prior to the Famine. Although records suggest that consolidation of landholdings took place prior to the Famine (and thus the halt of subdivision) there were far more reports countering this claim. The practice of consolidation was greater in Munster than in Connaught and as such identifies regional variations. In Connaught, for example, there was a continuation of the ‘practice of throwing small farms

21 Mokyr and Ó Grada, p.478-480  
22 Mokyr and Ó Grada, p.475  
23 Mokyr and Ó Grada, p.474  
24 Mokyr and Ó Grada, P.482-3  
25 Woodham-Smith, p.31
into still smaller ones’. The subdivision of land made two things possible: Firstly, it allowed a greater number of ‘farmers’ to acquire land. Secondly, it reduced the size of farms and the production capacity of them. Attempts to modernise the agricultural system met with passive and violent resistance, particularly in the west of the country. Thus, increased plot availability facilitated population growth throughout the first half of the nineteenth-century but reduced the size of landholdings. In the areas of Connaught most affected by the Famine, 64 per cent were less than five acres in size. These figures, from the 1841 census, take no account of the considerable number of landholdings that were less than an acre in size. The limitation in land size limited the crop yield in many areas. Nonetheless, the problem of land subdivision was accompanied by the increase in popularity of the potato across Ireland.

The influence of the potato and milk diet in assisting the reduction of landholdings is substantial. By the time of the famine, the potato fed 65 per cent of Ireland’s poorest population. The potato and milk diet was extremely nutritious. According to Connell’s analysis, the potato comfortably exceeded the daily allowances of vitamins, calcium and iron based on a ‘conservative’ estimate of ten pounds daily and a pint of milk for a labourer. The deficiencies of Vitamin G by 11 per cent and Protein by 9 per cent were moderate and would have been alleviated by an additional cupful of milk. In recent years, historical works have confirmed the nutritional value of the potato. As a result, the stability of the potato influenced the population in two ways:

It tended to lower the incidence of disease and, by making provision for a family seem no problem, it tended to encourage earlier, and more fruitful, marriage.

Connell concludes that the demographic importance of the potato facilitated the pre-Famine population growth within Ireland:

[When] potatoes were substituted for traditional foodstuffs, a family’s subsistence could be found from a diminished section of its holding... Always anxious, because of degradation and hopelessness of their lives, to marry young, the children now had the opportunity of doing so. The potato, then, by helping to allow subdivision, tended towards a lowering of the age at marriage, and earlier marriage was followed inescapably by higher fertility.

27 Christine Kinealy, This Great Calamity: The Irish Famine 1845-52 (Dublin 1994) hereafter Kinealy, p.10
28 Connell, p.163
30 Connell, p.156
31 Mokyr, p.486
32 Connell, p.156
33 Connell, p.160-1
Some historians feel that the demographic importance of the potato has been overestimated, as Ó Gráda and Mokyr have reported. There was a causal relationship between population growth and the potato but it was not significant enough to account for the increase after 1750 and there is some evidence that the potato was in decline during the decades up to the Famine. Moreover, L M Cullen suggested that the potato was unimportant for population growth: ‘other countries population grew in which the potato had not become a staple food’. Despite these disputes, the demographic importance of the potato and its causal relationship is a strong one. Comparing potato usage in Ireland with England, as Cullen did, is not valid. The two economies were vastly different. Britain’s industrialisation increased throughout the nineteenth-century. In contrast, Ireland saw a period of ‘deindustrialisation’ in the decades before the famine: In 1821, 43 per cent of the population were engaged in industry but this figure dropped to 28 per cent by 1841. In addition, just 17 per cent of the male labour force worked in industry compared to 70 per cent in Britain. Of that 17 per cent, a large number were in Belfast, which was one of the only areas to successfully migrate to factory production. As a result, comparing the importance of the potato within these two nations is inappropriate. The potato made an important contribution to the pre-Famine population boom that was facilitated by the increasing availability of land-holdings as a result of subdivision.

Poor living conditions were an additional factor that increased the misery and poverty of the vast majority of the agricultural class in the period up to the famine. As has been mentioned above, plot sizes were continually decreasing in the period to the Famine and, as a result, living conditions deteriorated. Further to this, homesteads erected on this plots were primitive and substandard. The *Illustrated London News* stated that the cabins in the west of Ireland were the most primitive. They were usually one-room mud huts that had not changed in decades. The article goes on to confirm that rural properties in Ulster were the best in the country. This is consistent with the custom of ‘tenant right’ where landlords in Ulster encouraged the development of land and buildings by giving compensation for improvements. However across Ireland there is regional variation, in the west of Ireland there was little security of tenure. Much of the land was leased year by year and any improvements made by the tenant went unpaid. Thus, there was no incentive to improve buildings, land or cultivation methods because any progression would increase the value of land (and rent) for the following year. The result was an agricultural stagnation of smallholdings: This precarious economic situation was what George Poulett Scrope referred to as ‘the notorious paralysis of agricultural industry’.

The decrease in industrial production coincided with an increase of agricultural output in Ireland. After 1770, Britain became a net importer of

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34 Mokyr, pp.486-7
35 Kinealy, p.9
37 *Illustrated London News* 12 August 1843
38 Mokyr, p.40
grain – Ireland being a major exporter to this apparently insatiable market and, by 1845, Irish grain exports fed two million abroad. For the most part, Ireland lacked industrial investment and, thus, could not compete with the industrialisation of Britain. Where Irish industry flourished (such as in Antrim which accounted for 50 per cent of linen production by 1821) it was at the expense of the proto-industry that had existed before. As K Theodore Hoppen described it:

Along the western seaboard, where the entire domestic textile industry had disintegrated by the 1830s and left a poor area, poorer still, population levels continued to rise at higher than average rates.

Hitherto, this proto-industry had allowed production in ‘conjunction with subsistence cultivation, thus maximising output from a small plot of land… linen production and potato cultivation were complementary’. Over the same period, ‘a swiftly increasing acreage was tilled’ and livestock grazing was reduced. Thus, the migration to factory output and agricultural tillage reduced the exchange entitlement of the rural family and agricultural output became the only commodity for exchange and subsistence. Despite the pressure on the agricultural system, there was little investment in agricultural production. Indeed, the system did not appear to change between the Act of Union and the Famine. Production increased not as a result of more efficient methods of cultivation but by the potato’s ‘encroach upon coarse unbroken ground’. Much of the Irish agricultural system became that of subsistence at the expense of the cash economy offered prior to the agricultural deflation from 1815.

The economic conditions resulting from this deflation, most noticeable from the 1821 Census, were to encourage the subsistence on a potato and milk diet alone. Increasingly, the sale of additional foodstuffs had become a method by which to pay rent. Although large farmers seem to have continued as they had before the conclusion of the Napoleonic war, small farmers saw agricultural prices drop by a third between 1815 and 1830 while rents increased and plot size diminished. The reduction of exchange entitlements also encouraged the first waves of emigration from Ireland. It must be noted, however, that whilst the agricultural situation deteriorated for that 65 per cent that relied upon the potato, Irish agriculture sustained a high level of commercialisation: By the 1840s, two-thirds of agricultural production was sold for cash. The drop in agricultural prices, though the evidence is inconclusive, must partially explain the drop in the average annual population growth and the propensity to emigrate before the Famine. Between 1815 and 1845, 1.5 million emigrated from Ireland at a rate of 0.6 per cent a year. This

39 Kinealy, p.10
41 Kinealy (1997), p.31
42 Connell, p.95
43 Connell, p.158
44 Hoppen, pp.42-43
45 Mokyr and Ó Gráda, p.487, p.483
emigration rate signalled that the population growth prior to 1815 was unsustainable over the longer period.
III - Government Relief: The Limits of Liberalism

The general chronology of the Famine, or the ‘Potato Famine’, tragedy is well documented by historians such as Woodham-Smith and Ó Gráda.\(^{46}\) The potato blight (*Phytophthora infestans*) was first noted in September 1845 and its first occurrence was most severe in the west of Ireland. Whilst pockets of agriculture remained totally unaffected, there was a shortfall of half in the Potato crop. The following harvest was much more severe, the beginnings of the Famine date from the autumn of 1846 when famine conditions were widespread. Deaths mounted in late 1846 and increased the following spring when commodity prices had risen sharply: Death was common and the incidence of dietary related diseases soared. The blight seemed to have ‘disappeared’ in 1847 and yields per acre were generous but the acreage under potato was small due to lack of seed and the poor signals from the previous harvests. The following year saw the return of the blight and, thus, agricultural Ireland saw at least four years of devastation.\(^{47}\) The charge most levelled against the British government is that concerning the adequacy of Government measures to ameliorate the condition of the Irish in this time of crisis: ‘responsibility for both immediate and long-term causes of the famine were laid at Britain’s door’.\(^{48}\) The interpretation that emerges from the recent works of authors like Kinealy is that the Government simply hadn’t done enough.

At the first indication of an economic crisis in Ireland, Peel’s government initiated Public Works and purchased £100,000 of Indian meal from the US for distribution in Ireland, largely to be ‘thrown in whenever prices rose unreasonably’.\(^{49}\) This was a justifiable purchase to prevent the profiteering that was a very real danger to the poorest people of Irish agricultural society. For example, following the repeal of the Corn Law prices of bread continued to rise, despite a decreasing price of Corn. According to the *Cork Examiner*, this was largely due to high prices maintained by the millers and demonstrated the problems of gluttonous merchants.\(^{50}\) ‘Peel’s response to the potato failure has generally been favourably regarded in Ireland’.\(^{51}\) According to the generally hostile *Freeman’s Journal*: ‘no man died of famine during [Peel’s] administration’. During Peel’s government over £185,000 was spent on the food importation scheme that included additional supplies purchased from the UK. Of that total, £135,000 was recovered from sales.\(^{52}\) However, such an intervention contravened the economic orthodoxy of the day:

> Warren Hastings, who had tackled a famine in Bengal in 1783-4 by using public channels for moving food into the region, was rapped on the knuckles by Colonel Baird-Smith for not having understood his Adam Smith, adding that Hastings could “scarcely have been expected” to have

\(^{46}\) Woodham-Smith; Kinealy; Cormac Ó Gráda, *The Great Irish Famine* (Dublin, 1989) etc.

\(^{47}\) Ó Gráda, p.102-3

\(^{48}\) Boyce, p.73

\(^{49}\) Woodham-Smith, p.55

\(^{50}\) The Cork Examiner, November 18 1846 and November 20 1846.

\(^{51}\) Daly, p.69

\(^{52}\) Daly, p.70
absorbed Adam Smith so soon (1783) after the publication (1776) of the Wealth of Nations. Authors such as Malthus and Nassau Senior, who emphasised the undesirability of economic intervention and intensified further this economic orthodoxy throughout the nineteenth-century. In July 1846, the Conservative government fell and was replaced by a Liberal government ‘whose faith in unregulated capitalism was absolute and believed that government must never interfere with the hidden hand of the market’. Although the Liberal government has received much condemnation for their economic policies, it must be remembered that the economic conditions during the 1846-7 season was more unfavourable to those of the previous year. It is difficult to estimate the impact Peel’s policy of purchasing food but ‘by 1846 the government had lost the element of surprise and secrecy’, according to Mary Daly. Furthermore, it was the responsibility of market forces to alleviate the problems of food shortage, according to Smith and Malthus: It was not the government’s responsibility to intervene. Private traders ‘apparently threatened not to import food’ unless the government assured that food would not be imported. Although the assurance was given, food depots continued to operate in the west of Ireland where the effects of the potato blight were severest. Despite the theoretical continuation of these food depots in the most destitute areas, the government only managed to import 4,800 tons to these depots. The autumn and winter of 1846-7 was a time of scarcity throughout Europe and shipping costs rose sharply. In addition to Ireland, Britain was affected by food scarcity throughout the period and this situation was exacerbated by the onset of a major industrial depression. To be fair to the Liberal government therefore, a continuation of Peel’s policy was hard to deliver.

The Tory government had intervened in the political order by its abolition of the Corn Laws the previous year that had placed tariffs on imported grain that had made the cost of the commodity more expensive: As a result, the government fell. The abolition of the Corn Laws was intended to make grain more affordable for the population whose potato crop had failed. However, as Sen has argued the availability of a commodity does not guarantee that it is available to those who most require it. Indeed, for some farmers the lowered price of corn intensified the economic problems of the 1840s because it decreased the Exchange Entitlement of the commodity for those that grew corn in Ireland. Similarly, supporters of the ‘market mechanism’ continued to be disappointed that the market failed to deliver the food movements promised by the economic theorists. The lack of food movements is affected by the failure of Entitlement provisions: ‘need’ and ‘demand’ are quite different. As a result of the lack of market based Entitlement, ‘Need’ could not be converted into ‘Demand’ because those in demand of any given

53 Sen, p.160
54 Thomas Cahill, ‘Why Famine Came to Ireland’, The Shamrock Leaf (Volume 34, July 2001) hereafter Cahill p.20
55 Daly, p.71
56 Sen, p.160
57 Daly, pp.71-72
commodity cannot be supplied because they lack the Exchange Entitlement in order to acquire it. In the case of Ireland, by the autumn of 1846, the Irish had exhausted their Exchange Entitlement and had sold as much as they could. There was a 90 per cent failure in the potato crop that year and, as Kinealy put it, '[a] national crisis had arrived'.

Tory policy to Ireland between 1845 and 1846 was not limited to food supply. It was over this period that the Chief Secretary for Ireland piloted a bill through parliament for Irish Works that provided £50,000 for small piers and harbours, for economic development. In addition, the Public Works spent £476,000 in the spring and summer of 1846 alleviating pressure on many of the poorest Irish. The Liberal policy, in the absence of food availability, focused its attention on an extension of the Public Works that consisted of road works and encouraged landlords to include drainage works. The success of the public works of spring 1846 'engendered the belief that traditional famine relief measures would again prove sufficient to meet the Irish crisis'. The intention of the Public Works was to increase the Exchange Entitlement of those affected by the potato failure and the spiralling cost of foodstuffs by waged employment by allowing them the funds to purchase substitute food. Employment would have increased the purchasing power of the workers and have had a positive effect on entitlement and deprivation. However, many historians have rejected these Works as having much positive effect. As a result of the ‘Labour Rate Act’ the loans from Treasury had to be paid back by the local community and, thus, had long-term detrimental effects to local communities. Furthermore, during the later months of 1846 demand for employment outstripped supply and wages were dropped to discourage the demand for Public Work employment. Over the same period, food prices rose and ‘real incomes’ suffered from a significant drop. Labourers that were worst affected by deprivation were unable to earn the wages required following the implementation pay by task work, too. By the end of 1846, a family (that could be as large as seven including children) had to survive of two pounds of corn, daily. As Kinealy concluded: ‘what was intended to be a subsistence wage had, in fact, deteriorated into a starvation wage’ that cost ‘a staggering £4,848,000’.

Poor relief in times of crop failure was not new in Ireland at the time of the Famine. Certainly, the earlier crop failures were minimal compared to what would come later but the measures used during those failures were not much different from the measures taken at the onset of the Famine. For example, the Board of Works provided £11,000 for relief work, to be used in the affected areas of Mayo and Galway during 1831. Perhaps the greatest failure of the Board of Works resulted from the many problems in trying to implement public works on such a large scale by a single body. The logistics was near
impossible in a system where corruption flourished and the usefulness of public ‘improvements’ were debatable. The Poor Law that was introduced to Ireland in 1838 remained quite separate from the outside relief because there was a concern that it might become a ‘permanent feature of the Law’ if temporary measures were permitted. Local relief committees were encouraged and given substantial grants, however. It is clear that because the Poor Law’s impact was limited to 100,000 inmates; it suffered from an ‘inability to provide sufficient relief during a period of acute distress or famine’. It was even clear that Workhouses only became an option once absolute destitution had arrived.

The failure of these relief measures to deal with the want and destitution of the Famine population was severe. The spiralling cost of foodstuffs made the outdoor labour policies unworkable. Labourers found that, even as a result of the income from this strenuous work, they lacked the strength and Exchange Entitlements to continue. Faced with the inefficacy of the Public Works, according to officials throughout Ireland, and the apparent efficacy of the Soup Kitchen’s operated by the Society of Friends, Government policy changed to direct gratuitous relief. That, hitherto, the liberals had resisted. From early 1847, the Public Works ground to a halt to be replaced by the Soup Kitchens. However, the administrative delay between the two created additional hardships, according to Daly:

[The] hiatus in famine relief in the early months of 1847, during one of the most difficult periods of all, and one marked by extremely high death-rates, is probably one of the most serious inadequacies in the whole government relief policy.

It is clear that the Liberal government rejected the economic orthodoxy of the time by initiating the Soup Kitchens: Nassau Senior had argued that ‘the problem in Ireland was relief’. Nonetheless, the soup kitchens that were set up in the summer of 1847 fed at least 20 per cent of the population in most parts of the country. In Munster and Connaught, this figure was much higher where at least 40 per cent were fed in every poor union. In Galway, moreover, the figure was as high as 90 per cent. As a result, the ‘acceptance [of direct relief] indicates that the British government was not as inflexible as some commentators have suggested’. As the impact of the Famine took hold, therefore, Government policy moved away from the Smith, Malthus and Senior approach to more direct measures to alleviate shortage that contravened economic orthodoxy.

The Poor Law Amendment (Ireland) Act of June 1847 signalled, still further, a break from economic doctrinal restrictions by extending the provision of the Poor Law. It created a separate Irish poor law commission and increased the

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65 Kinealy, p.63  
66 Daly, p.88  
67 Nassau Senior, Edinburgh Review cited in Ó Gráda, p.126  
68 PRONI, Education Facsimile, No.13 Famine  
69 Daly, p.88
number of poor law unions to ensure a more effective supervision of relief.\textsuperscript{70} Such a measure contradicted the conclusions that Malthus had made years earlier:

\begin{quote}
[The] establishment of a system of poor-laws… would at once sink the lower classes into a state of the most miserable poverty and wretchedness; would diminish their industry, and consequently the produce of the land and labour of the country; would weaken the resources of ingenuity in times of scarcity; and ultimately involve the country in all the horrors of continual famines.\textsuperscript{71}
\end{quote}

To alleviate the threat of ‘continual famines’ the funding arrangements of the Poor Law were revised so that its ratepayers covered the full cost of relief in any union.\textsuperscript{72} Subsequently, this measure has proved historically controversial. However, the intention of the measure was to ameliorate the agricultural situation by the intervention of the ratepayers. It became in their interests to increase the productive capacity of the agricultural and eradicate the degradation and inefficiencies that had developed over the previous century. Although such a method was economically justified, the Act increased the Landlords’ inclination to promote the consolidation of smallholdings that intensified the need for emigration. More so, it was politically required.\textsuperscript{73} In fairness to the Government, a reform of the agricultural system was overdue. By 1845, even according to the normally sympathetic view of Cecil Woodham-Smith: ‘Ireland was on the verge of starvation, her population rapidly increasing, three-quarters of her labourers unemployed and the standard of living unbelievably low’.\textsuperscript{74}

It is hard not to view the relief provisions during the Famine as anything other than a chronological progression. Each policy was a continuation, a revision or a rejection of what had gone before. Over the period of the Famine, Government policy changed radically. It is unfair to the British government to claim that they ‘refused to commit the sin of interfering with the market’.\textsuperscript{75} Much of the policies engaged by the Government disregarded the economic orthodoxy of Malthus and Smith that had become so prevalent in society. Furthermore, to argue that the Government could have done more is irrelevant: Of course they could have done more but there were limits to what they could achieve. These restrictions were not merely those imposed by economic doctrine, they were capitalist too. It is no doubt possible that ‘closing Irish ports together with a scheme of public works \textit{financed from Irish resources} would have been fully capable of meeting the Famine crisis’.\textsuperscript{76} However, this would not only have been a precarious form of famine relief; it would have required the kind of social revolution and redistribution of

\begin{footnotes}
\item[70] Alvin Jackson, \textit{Ireland 1798-1998} (Oxford, 2000) \textit{hereafter} Jackson, p.75
\item[72] Jackson, p.75-6
\item[73] See Chapter IV
\item[74] Woodham-Smith, p.36
\item[75] Cahill, p.21
\item[76] Boyce, p72
\end{footnotes}
Exchange Entitlement that had wiped out famine in communist countries during the twentieth century.\textsuperscript{77}

\textsuperscript{77} Sen, p.7: The shortage of food availability in communist shops, e.g. 1980’s Soviet Union, is no indication that this statement is inaccurate. As in China, the elimination of starvations normally proceeds an increase in food supply, according to Sen.
IV – Government Relief: Interpretation

With reference to market forces dealing with famine conditions, Ó Gráda writes:

Those without food lack the funds, and the authorities lack the will to transfer the food to them through political means, relying instead on market forces.\(^{78}\)

The failure of the agricultural population’s Exchange Entitlement increased their deprivation throughout the Famine. When market forces are used to enact food movements, the system supplies those able to pay the highest price and does not supply areas that are most required. Market forces did supply foodstuffs to areas where the population had sufficient Entitlement to exchange for commodities but did not supply areas where the need was greatest: It supplied areas where the demand and profitability was greatest. The British media responded humanely to this profiteering and signalled that the Irish were abusing British charity. As such, the Government were encouraged to leave it to the Irish. If The Times is a good indicator of public opinion, the perception of the Irish was far from favourable to increased relief efforts. The Times reported Irish merchants exploited the potato crop failure\(^{79}\) and that they were unwilling to import at a fair price when the Government were doing so.\(^{80}\) There was a growing sense in the idea that the famine had been exacerbated by the greed of the Irish themselves. Much of these criticisms, with reference to merchants, are justified, in hindsight, although such comments ignore economic mechanisms. As has been noted above, some merchants had refused to make food available if Government food shipments continued.\(^{81}\) Not only did food shipments disregard the economic liberalism of free trade, therefore, but also it was in the interests of Irish merchants to see them halted. As Ó Gráda has noted, some groups ‘may stand to gain from famine conditions’.\(^{82}\) This was certainly the case during the Famine and Sen’s hypothesis that starvation ‘depends “not merely” on food supply but also on its “distribution”, would be correct enough’.\(^{83}\) Despite the paradox that both encourages the market mechanism and then condemns it because of its construction, the media were generally hostile to this profiteering when British funds was still being poured into Ireland.

Media criticisms were not limited to the apparent inadequacies of relief measures. The increasing agitation of Daniel O’Connell’s Repeal Association caused many grievances within the press. These objections are exemplified by the fact that the movement continued to collect the ‘Catholic Rent’ that created much anti-Irish and anti-O’Connell media attention that is demonstrated in the satirical cartoons of Punch:\(^{84}\) O’Connell’s idea of

\(^{78}\) Ó Gráda, p.121  
\(^{79}\) The Times, March 20 1846  
\(^{80}\) The Times, April 15 1846  
\(^{81}\) See Chapter III  
\(^{82}\) Ó Gráda, p.121  
\(^{83}\) Sen, p.7  
\(^{84}\) For example, ‘Rint versus Potatoes’, Punch, November 15 1845.
‘relieving his country’ was ‘relieving it of £22,000 per annum’. Punch’s sympathy was diminished in proportion, further still, as Irish public opinion demonstrated support for the extreme line taken by Young Ireland which became evident in the Punch cartoon; “The Height of Impudence”. Here ‘a beggar approaches John Bull: ‘Spare a thrifle, yer Honour, for a poor Irish lad to buy a bit of… a Blunderbuss with’. 85 Actions taken by the Irish repeal movement, both before and after the split, had influences on the perception, in Britain, of the Irish. Punch’s sympathy for Ireland, hitherto arguably balanced to a degree, vanished once reports made it clear that the Paddy would rather acquire guns than food for his family. It must also be remembered that the split between the ‘old’ and Young Irelanders of the repeal movement was not the final act. Further splits were to occur, John Mitchel became the voice of an Irish form of anarchic social revolution: Each week the United Irishman paper published a bastardised version of Fintan Lalor’s doctrine of social revolution. ‘Preparations for armed rebellion [from late spring 1848] began, with complete lack of concealment – they were known in detail to the police and fully described by the newspapers’. 86 At the height of Famine hardship in Ireland, extremists advocated the non-payment of the poor rate: The only relief measure that ‘stood between tens of thousands [from] death and starvation’. Thus, it was inevitable that media sympathy would diminish still further in view of this uncivilised act of insurrection. During a period of destitution, poverty, hunger and starvation, the Young Irelanders conspired to deprive those in most need of any compassion from Britain, her press or her government. Punch, for example, increasingly portrayed the Irish as inferior uncivilised apes. 88

The Times Commissioner in Ireland, Thomas Foster, commented that ‘for the poverty and distress and misery which exist, the people have themselves to blame’. 89 No doubt this public opinion only increased as the famine continued and the “extensive” efforts of the British government appeared more ineffective. Hierarchical elements of Irish society came under constant scrutiny too; the middle-classes were criticised for abusing the poor laws and the landlords apparently hoarding huge quantities of money in Dublin banks. 90 Much of these criticisms can be justified but this was not the case throughout Ireland: ‘Some landlords and strong farmers bankrupted themselves trying to cope with their starving dependents’, commented Roy Foster, but just as many ‘simply closed their gates and demanded their rents’. 91 These media reports, however, focused on the failure of landlords to ameliorate the condition of the affected population and made little account of Landlord-sponsored relief measures that had been enacted prior to the government-sponsored measures. For example, the Marquess of Waterford, ‘universally

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86 Woodham-Smith, p.346
87 Woodham-Smith, p.334
88 Paddy, p.175, p.177, p.189 – various cartoons from Punch
89 T. C. Foster, Letters on the Condition of the People of Ireland (London, 1896) hereafter T. C. Foster; Donegal 1846
90 The Times, March 14 1846 and September 17 1847
popular and respected, sponsored various relief measures throughout his extensive estates including ‘soup kitchens’ in Derry and Waterford following the crop failure of 1846. However, the media tended instead to focus on the inadequacies of landlords: The Times’ most popular example was that of Daniel O’Connell who failed to teach his tenants the value of keeping their manure heap dry and allowed his tenants to live in some of the most wretched conditions in Ireland. Punch took a similarly dim view of O’Connell; attacking his administration of his Derrynane estate and, through ‘The Real Potato Blight of Ireland’ cartoon, cast him as a weighted potato with the peasantry’s funds beneath his throne. Many other landlords were regarded just as reprehensibly and were increasingly expected to deal with their own problems. As the political economist John Stuart Mill put it:

We have observed that, as a general rule, the business of life is better preformed by those who have an immediate interest in it are left to take their own course.

The failure of the landlords to improve the conditions of their tenants was their own doing. Over the Famine period, therefore, the true horrors of the destitution and hunger were lost: ‘Ingratitude rather than starvation became the leading characteristic of the Irish represented’ in the British press. Thus when the Poor Law Amendment Act was passed in June 1847, the press welcomed the ungrateful becoming responsible for their own failings.

In his 1860 work, The Last Conquest of Ireland, the exiled John Mitchell argued that ‘the almighty, indeed, sent the potato blight but the English created the Famine’. This often quoted passage has become the cornerstone of much Famine literature, particularly in Irish-American writings, from those onlookers that regard the Famine not just as a cyclical Malthusian tale in Irish history but a concerted effort to remove the surplus population of Ireland. The Irish Famine Genocide Committee, for example, is an Irish-American organisation that promotes awareness of the Famine as a genocide-like event on the Internet. Here, such writers as Christine Kinealy and Seamus Metress provide much of the content in the organisations condemnation of the British government. Metress’s most recent work published is entitled The Great Starvation as Opportunistic Genocide and uses other historian’s writings to demonstrate how the British created ‘genocide’. For example, upon writing about the liberation of Belsen, A J P Taylor wrote ‘only a century before, all Ireland was Belsen. Nearly two million Irish People died of starvation and fever within five years’. Metress uses such quotes to suggest that the government allowed such events to exist and thus justifies the charge of genocide. In addition, J V Mullin’s The Great Irish

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92 PRONI, Education Facsimile, No. 3 Famine
93 T. C. Foster, Letter V, Letter XXVI
94 Paddy, p.178-9
95 Kinealy, p.24
96 Paddy, p.178
97 John Mitchel, The Last Conquest of Ireland (New York, 1860)
98 The ‘Irish Famine Genocide Committee’ website can no longer be found at http://www.ifgc.org/. However, the material is available elsewhere as described in the Bibliography.
99 Seamus Metress, ‘The Great Starvation as Opportunistic Genocide’, Internet; see Bibliography.
Famine has been included New Jersey Commission on Holocaust Education for inclusion in the Holocaust and Genocide Curriculum. This modern Irish-American commentary does not view the Famine within the same time frame as has been discussed above (from 1845). Instead, it sees ‘Black 47’ (the year of the greatest destitution, emigration, hunger, disease and death) as the start point. This start point coincides with the effective conclusion of Government sponsored relief in Ireland: Indeed, some believed that following ‘Black 47’ the Famine was over and 1848 ‘was accepted as a cut-off point for studies of the Famine for many years’. The memory of the Famine in North America is, however, quite different.100

The Famine tradition in North America has been passed along down the generations: Emigration was caused by the Famine and the English caused the Famine. As Christie Moore’s ballad City of Chicago begins:

In the city of Chicago  
As the evening shadows fall  
There are people dreaming  
Of the hills of Donegal

Eighteen forty seven  
Was the year it all began  
Deadly pains of hunger  
Drove a million from the land  
They journeyed not for glory  
Their motive wasn’t greed  
A voyage of survival  
Across the stormy sea…101

The memory of the Famine in North America is that of death, destitution, mass emigration, coffin ships, Grosse Isle and Ellis Island. Imagery that is both powerful and difficult to quantify. As with the case of Mullin’s curriculum, this North American view places much more emphasis on the trauma of the Famine, rather than the Malthusian or revisionist approach. Indeed, the Famine is not always regarded as famine: The Great Starvation is the most appropriate title for North Americans, echoing the ‘smouldering passion’ of Shaw’s, Irish-American character; Malone.102 The huge numbers that left Ireland through emigration, 219,885 in 1847 and as high as 368,764 in 1852,103 were unwillingly exiled from their homeland; according to these interpretations.

Christine Kinealy evokes a similarly nationalist revaluation of the Famine to an American audience that sees the Government as most responsible for the conditions and Death of the Famine. For example, in her work A Death Dealing Famine one whole chapter is entitled ‘A Policy of Extermination’. Though not her words in origin, she does little to discount this theory, her ultimate conclusion being that the Government allowed the famine to

100 Kinealy, Introduction p.xvii  
101 Christie Moore, ‘City of Chicago’, Ride On (Killarney, March 1984)  
102 Shaw, Act. IV, v.54-58  
103 Kinealy, p.298
continue, ‘arguing that the changes ultimately would benefit Ireland’.\textsuperscript{104} Similarly, in \textit{This Great Calamity} she asserted that the government ‘used the famine as an opportunity to reform Ireland’s economy’.\textsuperscript{105} ‘There is much to suggest that there was a need for reform and that the British establishment, not just the economists, saw the pre-Famine conditions as ‘the embarrassment of Irish Society’.\textsuperscript{106} Eviction and forced emigration, which rocketed following the revision of the poor law in early 1847, remains a potent image of the interpretation of Black 47. ‘Gerald Keegan’ interprets this eviction and emigrations as ‘a forced expulsion under a plan conceived and now being executed by the landlords’.\textsuperscript{107} Prior to the Famine, social commentators saw mass emigration as a solution to Ireland’s problems of over-population and economic underdevelopment. As a result of the revision of the poor law and the responsibility of relief being placed upon the ratepayers, ‘emigration and mortality cleared the poorest counties of a large proportion of their populations at no expense to the government’.\textsuperscript{108} Government policy, therefore, encouraged and required the expulsion of the population by the landlords for local economic reasons. The responsibility of what came afterwards is laid at the hands of the ‘English’: This interpretation pictures the Coffin Ships and the high mortality rates at North American ports as a direct result of political policy. The enormity of the situation was ‘the refusal by what was then the richest country in the world to mend the [long-term] injustice that it was solely responsible for and allow the innocent to live’\textsuperscript{109} In his evidence to the parliamentary enquiry in 1849 the chief poor law commissioner, Edward Twistleton, stated that:

\begin{quote}
The building of additional workhouses and other changes in the Poor Law would have been unnecessary if the government had made more money available. If this had occurred, distress and death would have been prevented.\textsuperscript{110}
\end{quote}

The failure of the Government to make more funds available, in light of rising mortality, has only intensified the allegations of “genocide”. Many a moralist would suggest that there is no cost to a human life. Evidently, not only did the British government feel that such a cost did exist, but that it was too high a price pay.

With the exception of the actual relief measures undertaken or directed by the government such as the public works, soup kitchens and an extension of the poor laws, media perception limited the extent of Government policy that could be implemented, with regard to relief. Although the actual relationship

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{104} Kinealy (1997), p.150
\textsuperscript{105} Kinealy, pp.354-5
\textsuperscript{106} Terry Eagleton, \textit{Heathcliff and the Great Hunger} (London, 1996), p.8
\textsuperscript{107} James J. Mangan (ed.), ‘Gerald Keegan’, Famine Diary (Dublin, 2000), p.15. ‘Gerald Keegan’ is quoted because it has now proved unlikely that this character was the author of the work. Instead, it is a North American fictional work and, thus, the representations of the ‘Diary’ reflect the opinions for the second or third generations.
\textsuperscript{108} Kinealy (1997), p.146
\textsuperscript{109} Cahill, p.21
\textsuperscript{110} Kinealy, pp.281-282
\end{footnotes}
between Government policy and public opinion is hard to verify, it is certain that had greater expenditure been bestowed upon Ireland from the public purse, additional legislation toward Ireland would have been unpopular. Even relatively minor contributions, such as the £50,000 grant-in-aid package, of 1848, was attacked by the press for ‘subsidizing lazy Irish peasants rather that deserving English agricultural labourers’, as emphasised by the Punch cartoon; "The English Labourer’s Burden".\(^{111}\) A Times editorial, in March 1846, viewed the Irish as lazy similarly: ‘Instead of increased exertion and renewed industry, passive submission and despondent indolence awaited a famine epoch. Even the annual migration of labour was suspended in many instances’.\(^{112}\) Economic conditions in Britain further contrived to limit the Government’s freedom in Ireland: Britain was in the depths of an economic depression until 1849 and the financial problems of northern England, in 1848, certainly didn’t help the situation. Certainly, the Government could have done more to directly ameliorate the conditions of the Irish poor but their actions were restricted not only by economic orthodoxy that suggested that ‘the problem in Ireland was relief’;\(^{113}\) their political willingness to act was restricted by the growing anti-Irish sentiment within the media of the day.

\(^{111}\) Paddy, p.180

\(^{112}\) The Times, 22 September 1846

\(^{113}\) Nassau Senior, Edinburgh Review cited in Ó Gráda, p.126
V – Conclusion: Memory and Morality

The difficulty in any evaluation of an event of such magnitude as the Famine is what is left unsaid. The intention of this assessment was to glimpse the varying degrees of imagery and interpretation, with specific attention to Government responses, which have made a conclusive history of the Famine period impossible to date. The effect of ‘revisionism’, if such a term exists, is that the ‘suffering and human degradation which accompanied the food shortages [of the Famine] has been moved from centre stage’. Therefore, the difficulties facing an historian of the Famine period are vast and varied: If one attempts to quantify distress and misery, it could either; not go far enough or take too much account of anecdotal evidence and preconceptions. This difficulty has certainly been made evident in this evaluation by its omission. In place of a direct interpretation of distress, has remained the imagery exemplified by contemporary accounts contained within these chapters. Therefore, these secondary evaluations have been compared and contrasted with as much relevance to Government responses as is possible with a finite study such as this. Furthermore, a broader assessment of Famine imagery would have lost much of the analysis required in such a report. Even within this restricted framework it is still hard to come to a conclusive understanding, to the justifiability of Government responses, to the conditions of 1840s Ireland.

There were many factors that transformed the *phytophthora infestans* potato failure into a famine. Over the long-term, rapid population growth, lack of investment and industrial degradation had created a weak economic system. Moreover, the effects upon Sen’s concepts of entitlement and the lack of exchange entitlement had been manifested over the previous centuries and decades, prior to the Famine. The responsibility of limiting the economic buoyancy of Ireland can be placed at the hands of the previous governments when they limited trading options with restrictive Woollen and Cattle Acts, but not at the hands of the Government over the Famine period. A degraded economic infrastructure would later affect the effectiveness of relief. Shorter-term agricultural factors contributed greatly to problems; creating a monoculture based upon the potato that was exacerbated by the slump in agricultural prices following the conclusion of the European war. Even without the arrival of the fungus, in 1845, Ireland was teetering on the brink of disaster before the blight emerged and became steadily worse. Many of these contributory factors could be attributed to previous governments; despite parliamentary commission reports on the state of Ireland little had legislative to ameliorate the conditions in Ireland. The Devon Commission and no fewer than 114 other parliamentary commissions in the period up to the Famine ‘all prophesised disaster’. Nonetheless, it would not be erroneous to suppose that the Government could have affected change: They would likely have faced opposition from the vast majority of the Irish population; both landlords and tenants alike would likely have opposed them: For example, the ‘timid bill based on [the Devon Commission’s] recommendations giving a right to

114 Kinealy, Introduction p.xix
115 Woodham-Smith, p.36
compensation for improvements was denounced as “a violation of the rights of property” and withdrawn.\textsuperscript{116} Some believed that Ireland was not over-populated, just its population misplaced. Contemporaries suggested that Ireland could have fed two and a half times its population.\textsuperscript{117} As Sen argues however, the availability of food is not the problem during a famine; the problem is the lack of exchange entitlement. As a result, the availability of food does not infer Government responsibility for genocide for the immediate effects of the Famine.

Where the Government could, theoretically, have done more was in immediate relief. However, as we have seen in chapter four, they were restricted by public opinion toward Ireland and her people. The Government achieved what best could have been during the period, leaving the majority of relief to groups such as the Quakers and, subsequently, to the Irish themselves as a consequence of poor law reforms in 1847 and 1849. The imagery of the destitution, hunger and death is, however, harder to reconcile. The impact of the Famine is one that has been augmented to suit particular agendas, particularly in nationalist history but also how Irish-Americans remember it. Comparatively, the feelings of hurt and pain are stronger in the peoples of the world that consider themselves ‘Irish’ than those born in Ireland to this day.

In the absence of a conclusive comment to complete this study of the Irish Famine, sentimentality, inevitably, is the best finale. Government responses, as has been argued in chapter Four, were limited, affected and augmented by economic, political, public and media opinion. Government culpability has been viewed within the context of the Victorian era but where a moralist might maintain that such a catastrophe would never happen in the twenty-first century they would be disappointed:

\begin{quote}
We continue to blame the poor for being poor, we continue to advance the theory that children must suffer for their parents’ supposed irresponsibility. As the sun makes its journey west today, half the world’s children will go to bed hungry. One out of seven is facing actual starvation. There is no lack of food in our world, any more than there was in nineteenth century Britain; the only lack is our willingness to distribute it justly.\textsuperscript{118}
\end{quote}

Evidently, the world has learned nothing from the Famine.

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\textsuperscript{116} Woodham-Smith, p.36
\textsuperscript{117} Mokyr, p.39
\textsuperscript{118} Cahill, p.21
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E Szabo (ed.), Interpreting The Irish Famine, 1846-1850
Website: http://www.people.virginia.edu/~eas5e/Irish/Famine.html
Description: Overview of the Famine and resources.

J Ward, The Famine – 'The Times' – and Donegal
Website: http://www.vindicator.ca/history/famine/timesDonegal.asp

Yahoo Web Index
Website: http://dir.yahoo.com/Regional/Countries/Ireland/Arts_and_Humanities/Humanities/History/By_Time_Period/19th_Century/Great_Famine__The/
Description: Catalogue of Irish Famine material on the Internet.
Appendix

1. ‘Great Irish Famine Curriculum’ Circulation Figures:

Would that I could give you an accurate account of the schools using our curriculum. The web site Irish Famine has had over 70,000 hits, but I have no idea who they are. We (my non-profit organisation) has sold and given away hundreds of copies of the curriculum and an edited version of "When Ireland Starved", but I do not follow up to see if the materials are used. About five years ago we did a questionnaire mailing to NJ high school social studies teachers, and we received replies from about one-half of them. Half of those said they were using the curriculum (provided free by the NJ Holocaust Education Commission), and the other half requested a copies. The Holocaust Commission also did a questionnaire regarding the use of all the genocide and Holocaust curricula. The results showed that the Irish Famine curricula was the most heavily used after the one dedicated to the Holocaust. Out of 398 high schools in the state, there are about 70 that did not reply to either questionnaire. The rest of the replies indicate that about 145 are using the Irish Famine curriculum.

Source: James Mullin, by Email. Original copy is in Author’s possession: Copied in its original form.