

# The Great Famine in Colonial Context: Public Reaction and Responses in Britain before the “Black ’47”

Carl J. Griffin

*Department of Geography  
University of Sussex*

**ABSTRACT:** Since the early 1990s the study of the Great Famine of 1845-52 has been subject to a critical and creative renewal, with historians and historical geographers alike producing detailed, nuanced, and theoretically rich understandings of the causes and consequences of the blight made famine. Central to this renewal has been the focus on the policy and relief reactions of the British government, the direct colonial controllers of Irish policy. We also now know, thanks to the pioneering work of Christine Kinealy, much about government-sanctioned and regulated charitable relief efforts in operation from early 1847. What has not been subject to such detailed scrutiny is the reaction and responses of the wider British public before 1847, the period when the blight first appeared and changing British governmental responses acted to turn acute scarcity into absolute biological need. In so doing, it shows that initially public reactions were confused and complex, tending towards sympathy and indifference at once, informed by a deep-seated public understanding – themselves shaped by wider political discourses – that Ireland was a problem. Moreover, the major popular political movements of the Anti-Corn Law League and Chartism opportunistically exploited the emergent famine for their own campaigning ends. This is not to claim, however, that popular reactions were altogether unfeeling, the fear and threat of scarcity and famine in England and Scotland acting to foster shared concerns with the poor Irish victims of uncaring absentee landlords. When it became apparent that after the failure of the 1846 potato harvest and with the withdrawal of direct government relief, people were beginning to die of want and from famine-related diseases, non-government sponsored subscriptions to relieve the famine Irish were readily and extensively entered into.

[Mrs Forster of Arranmore had written to England] till she was ashamed to tire their generosity again, not once had she been refused from the churches there.<sup>1</sup>

The good faith of the empire should be staked to prevent the scenes that have occurred in the west.<sup>2</sup>

The Great Famine casts a shadow over the culture and politics of Ireland and its peoples so totally that it belongs to small group of events in global history that can truly be claimed as marking a profound fissure in time and space.<sup>3</sup> As is well-rehearsed, if not absolutely without controversy, between 1846 and 1852 scarcity-made-famine robbed Ireland of one million of its sons and daughters through starvation and conditions associated with chronic malnourishment, and ultimately led to two million others fleeing destitution (and possible death) by seeking a life overseas.<sup>4</sup> The shadow of this disgraceful episode is, unsurprisingly, also cast on the telling of Ireland’s “national story,” taking a central part in both general survey histories and in famine

historiography's dominant position in Irish social and political history and historical geography. This has not always been the case. As Emily Mark-Fitzgerald has recently noted, it was not until the 1990s that famine memorials increased in number from a "small handful" to more than 100.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, as Christine Kinealy has suggested, it was not until the 1990s that the famine assumed a vital place in the teaching of Irish history in schools and universities. Teaching of the famine had been important before the 1930s, but thereafter revisionist histories in their attempt to forge new, self-confident, post-reactionary nationalist identities "played down" the famine as a watershed in the making of modern Ireland.<sup>6</sup>

From the late 1980s, the historiography of the Great Famine has witnessed an unprecedented flowering. Through the pioneering acts of post-revisionist synthesis of, amongst others, Margaret Crawford, Peter Gray, and Christine Kinealy, to the more quantitative, economic history approaches of Joel Mokyr and Cormac O'Grada, to more recent culturally and politically sophisticated studies by Tim Pat Coogan, Emily Mark-Fitzgerald and David Nally, and in John Crowley, William J. Smyth and Mike Murphy's *Atlas*, the famine has truly assumed a new centrality in Irish history.<sup>7</sup> One aspect of post-revisionist accounts that is truly novel—in comparison to both pre-1930s historiography and later revisionist accounts—is the emphasis placed on relief schemes, highlighting the ways in which the giving of "relief" was in and of itself constitutive of turning scarcity into a devastating famine. Conversely, this post-revisionist literature has also shown how humanitarian impulses acted to check further devastation. Indeed, the giving of relief in both the form of formal, statutory poor relief through the Irish Poor Law of 1838 and through public donations have become a critical theme in post-revisionist accounts, perhaps best reflected in Kinealy's 2013 monograph *Charity and the Great Hunger in Ireland: the Kindness of Strangers*.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, as James Donnelly notes, "ever since the Great Famine people have debated the culpability of the British government in the mass deaths which marked and defined that horrendous social catastrophe."<sup>9</sup> The response of the governments of Prime Ministers Sir Robert Peel and Lord John Russell has been subjected to intense critical scrutiny. What has not figured in such studies, though, is the British public's reaction to the famine. The one exception is Donnelly's examination of British public opinion of the June 1847 Poor Law Amendment Act, and this exclusively through the lens of the anti-relief *Times* and the *Illustrated London News*. Similarly, Kinealy's recent study of relief practices and giving has analyzed in detail the workings of the British Relief Association of Extreme Distress in the Remote Parishes of Ireland and Scotland (BRA). It is important to note though that the BRA was established in January 1847 at the behest of Prime Minister Lord John Russell and assistant secretary to the British Treasury, Sir Charles Trevelyan, and publicly backed in two letters of support by Queen Victoria. This was no spontaneous public outpouring of sympathy and support. While many working and middle-class communities and individuals did generously support the BRA, in relation to the British public reaction Kinealy's account focuses more on the actions of prominent individuals and businesses and groups supporting the mission of the BRA.<sup>10</sup>

This paper builds upon these critical studies in asking what the British public response and reaction to the famine was before the founding of the BRA. In so doing, it widens Donnelly's study of British public opinion to encompass a broader range of sources of public record, considers the responses of the Anti-Corn Law League and the Chartist movement, and asks whether non-state sanctioned public subscriptions were raised before the "official" call.<sup>11</sup> It does so, initially, by placing into perspective British official and state-sanctioned relief efforts and responses. Before that, it is necessary to place the making of the famine into Ireland's wider colonial and geopathogenic context.

### Blight made famine: the British colonial context

In commercial affairs, as well as in political, Ireland is going backwards. Her population in latter years has doubled; so have her resources—so have her agricultural capabilities—but the blight of English legislation is over it all.<sup>12</sup>

The potato harvest of 1845 promised to be prodigious. As the *Banner of Ulster* put it at the beginning of August, “this crop—the staple of Ireland—is more abundant this season than it has been for several years past.”<sup>13</sup> Plants were healthy and there was “scarcely” any blight “in the North.” So bountiful would be the crop—the heaviest in years even—that prices were expected to fall.<sup>14</sup> A month later and in the full swing of harvest, the Belfast press was not only reporting a better than expected grain harvest in Antrim but also that the late unseasonal showers had in no way damaged the potatoes.<sup>15</sup> The *Dublin Evening Post* went further: “[T]here never, perhaps, was a finer growth of Potatoes, which are selling at about half the price of this time last year.”<sup>16</sup> The blessing of Divine Providence, so reckoned the *Limerick Chronicle*, had protected the crops and allowed a glut of new potatoes to be sold cheaply at Limerick market in late August.<sup>17</sup>

Reports from elsewhere in north-western Europe were in stark contrast. In early August a strange phenomenon was witnessed in the potato fields around Nimeguen and Heusden in the south Netherlands: potatoes dying in the course of one night.<sup>18</sup> Once infected, all potato plants in the field withered and dried up in a few hours. Similar reports were soon also being made in Belgium, northern France and around the Rhine. More-or-less concurrently, reports of an unusual blight also issued from the Weald of Kent and Sussex in England.<sup>19</sup> In late July, a localized “partial blight” had been noticed, but by August 12, 1845 it had spread through East Sussex and Kent leading to predictions that there would be a “failure, to a great extent” in the crop.<sup>20</sup> “Complaints” that potatoes had turned black and were found to be of no use whatsoever were soon termed “very general.”<sup>21</sup> A week later, the spread was said to be rapid, with cases confirmed on the east coast in Essex and Suffolk and westwards into Hampshire and Surrey.<sup>22</sup> By the end of August reports confirmed that the blight had spread as far west as the area around Truro and Redruth in Cornwall. So extensive was the damage—and so all consuming was critical commentary in the provincial and horticultural press—that speculation started as to the cause of the blight (variably the poor weather of the “season” was to blame, murrain had spread from cattle, or a pathogen was spread in the air) and as to ways in which the “rot” could be cured.<sup>23</sup>

In Ireland these reports were noted with, as Kinealy puts it, “curiosity rather than alarm.”<sup>24</sup> On August 29, 1845 the *Cork Examiner*, on reporting the “most serious apprehensions” in southern England, could still reassure its readers that the north of England was as yet free from the blight and there was “not the least symptom of its approach” anywhere in Ireland.<sup>25</sup> This was not strictly true, for in late August the blight had been observed at the Botanical Gardens in Glasnevin, Dublin.<sup>26</sup> While this was not initially made public, and similar observations were not published “lest after all the suspected visitation should only prove imaginary,”<sup>27</sup> on September 6, 1845 both the *Dublin Evening Post* and the *Waterford Freeman* announced that Irish potatoes had now been killed by the blight.<sup>28</sup> As the editor of the latter publication grimly reported, the spread of the blight was already “considerable” and the likely consequences “very serious.” Or as the *Cork Examiner* put it four days later, “our worst fears are likely to be realised”; and soon, notwithstanding that markets continued to be plentifully supplied and prices low, it and other newspapers were warning of the likelihood of famine.<sup>29</sup>

While subject to revision and counter-revision, an effect of the potato blight—the water—and air-borne pathogen *phytophthora infestans* as it was later identified—was a famine with a mortality rate, according to Amartya Sen, higher than for any other recorded famine in human

history, with only the Ukrainian famine of the 1930s comparable in the history of modern Europe.<sup>30</sup> Between 1846 (there were no famine deaths in 1845) and 1852 one million people perished, with some two million others leaving Ireland, many of these individuals also dying on their journeys or soon after arriving in America, Canada and England.<sup>31</sup> But, as historians of the famine have noted, crop failures do not themselves make famines. Social, cultural, legal, and political systems do. In the context of 1840s Ireland, it was arguably the interplay between three interrelated colonial systems that turned scarcity into famine.

First, the landowning system meant that the vast majority of the land was owned by a small group of largely absentee landlords who through land law and customary practices enjoyed almost total power over their tenants. Most tenants were the landless laborers, holding one-year contracts with no incentive to invest in their small plots, while at the same time needing to maximize the return from their rental planted for the short-term only, invariably in the form of the prolific potato. British acknowledgements that the system was essentially unfair as well as fears for the sustainability of agricultural subdivision, given recent rapid population growth (from 6.5 million in 1841 to a probable 8 million in 1845), led to the Devon Commission being established by Peel in 1843 to investigate the occupation of land. Reporting in early 1845, the Commission's investigations were neither as extensive nor were its recommendations for land reform as wide-reaching as had been hoped.<sup>32</sup>

Second, British mercantile policy was both in a state of ideological flux and geopolitical confusion. By the time the potato blight started to wreak its havoc in the fields of Ireland, the dominant issue in British politics was reform of the so-called Corn Laws, a complex and much-amended protectionist system comprising a sliding scale of import duties for corn designed to protect English farmers from the full effects of foreign competition. An anathema to both industrialists who believed that the corn laws acted to "artificially" inflate the cost of food, and hence the wages they paid to their workforce thereby reducing their international competitiveness, and to the apostles of Adam Smith, the balance of members of the House of Commons was gradually shifting in favor of repeal. This was in no small part due to the innovative and effective campaigns of the Manchester-based Anti-Corn Law League. Amongst their number was Peel, converted to the free trade cause in the 1820s but leading a Tory party and government of landowners ideologically and self-interestedly against repeal. The position in relation to Ireland—at once part of the union and yet commercially subject to different values and rules—was messy, provisional and decidedly partial. When, seemingly against the parliamentary odds, repeal passed through the Houses of Commons and Lords on May 12, 1846, it was applied in relation to Ireland in decidedly doctrinaire ways.<sup>33</sup>

Relatedly, and finally, Ireland's status as a colonial "problem" while also part of the Union was reflected in confused and often contradictory policy impulses and prescriptions. As noted, the issue of land reform never achieved wholehearted support from either Whigs or Tories, both often finding their governments reliant on support from Irish landowning MPs. Even the early evidence of famine conditions in late 1845 and early 1846 proved no spur to shift from the characteristic hesitancy to actually "meddle" with Irish land policy. As Robert Shipkey has put it, Peel's 1841-46 administration initially followed the by-then customary "do nothing" policy in relation to Ireland. From 1843, the position of Peel's government shifted from policy inactivity to "conciliation," this evidenced in the setting up of the Devon Commission and Peel's unequivocal public support for Catholic education in the form of significantly increasing the grant to the Maynooth seminary in 1845.<sup>34</sup>

It is possible to overlay conciliation though, for neither policy met Irish demands nor worked politically for Peel, a situation reminiscent of the political aftermath of his Irish "concession" in the form of Catholic Emancipation in 1828-9. For the majority of British

(elected) politicians, Ireland remained a problem. One hundred years of scarcity and famine and seemingly endemic agrarian protest against hardnosed absentee landlords and their capitalist grazier tenants producing grain, dairy and meat for the British market, had left successive Westminster governments frustrated at their inability to control the unruly colony. Not even the bitter repression of the United Irishmen between 1798 and 1803 and the concurrent dissolution of the Irish parliament and the passing of the Act of Union between Great Britain and Ireland acted to check the perception that Ireland remained not only a problem but *apart*. The resurgence of Irish nationalism in the early 1840s through the Young Ireland “movement” (arguably the most coherent, non-sectarian assertion of Ireland’s right to self-government against British colonial self-interest) under the charismatic direction of John Blake Dillon and Thomas Davis, also represented a major nationalist threat to the future of the Union. Contra the form of Irish nationalism peddled by Daniel O’Connell, it also represented a threat to the interests of landowners.<sup>35</sup>

None of this meant that the British state had given up on Ireland. Social reform, political control and the cultural embrace with the Union remained the holy grail, the solution (always) one piece of legislation away. As Gray has noted, “[t]he transformation of Irish society was to follow directly from Corn Law repeal,” this just the latest in a long time of attempts to engineer colonial cohesion.<sup>36</sup> Nally has recently suggested that not only was the British state complicit in trying to reform Ireland, to bring it under *its* control, but it also actively used Ireland as a test bed for new techniques of governing, new forms of governmentality. By positioning Ireland as both a form of property and as a problem, it was also possible to assert the authority to regulate and classify the Irish body politic and the bodies of Irish men and women, with the population disaggregated according to their use, “conduct and perceived threat to social order.”<sup>37</sup> The primary object of political strategy of this new approach then was the regulation of “the basic biological features of the human species,” and under its prescriptions scarcity and famine were permissible as the possible means to provoke desired political and social outcomes.<sup>38</sup> As Nally, drawing on the work of David Keen, puts it, “famines now ha[d] functions as well as causes.”<sup>39</sup> With this in mind, the following section details the response of the British government to the onset of the scarcity and the (engineering of the) famine.

### **British state responses and relief, 1845-47**

As noted, the immediate reaction of the Westminster government to the sign of extensive potato blight in Ireland was to do nothing. Initially the policy was not without *some* justification, for Home Secretary Sir James Graham was correct in his assessment that, while blighted, the crop was abundant.<sup>40</sup> Past shortages had not led to famines, hence there was hope—however naïve and misplaced—that Irish cottiers would be able to survive the winter without government intervention. Peel was also deeply skeptical of Irish communications in the early months after the identification of the blight, believing that, as in the past as he saw it, Irish magistrates were “calling wolf.”<sup>41</sup> Pleas by the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, Lord Heytesbury, on October 27, 1845 that to “tranquillise the public mind and diminish the panic” the government ought to offer some, as Shipkey has put it, “show of action” were ignored. The revived Mansion House Committee (formed in Dublin in 1821 to raise subscriptions to assist distressed areas) also made a plea to Peel through Heytesbury that exports should be banned, distilleries prohibited from using grain, public granaries founded, and a program of public works set up to employ those out of work. This too received short shrift. Missives from similar organisations in Belfast, Cork and Londonderry were likewise passed off.<sup>42</sup>

In short, the initial response was thereby predicated on a combination of past prejudices and experiences, Peel’s ideological adherence to the self-righting powers of political economy, combined with what he perceived to be a lack of decisive evidence. To this end, two factors are

critical. Governmental refusal to ban exports was founded on two understandings. First, that if merchants could find an overseas market for diseased potatoes then they should be allowed to export them and bring cash into the economy, which, in turn, would be used to import nutritious foodstuffs. Second, food exports were normally limited to the main cash crop, wheat ("corn"), dairy products and livestock. While potatoes dominated the diet of the vast majority of the population – Irish laboring families not just eating potatoes out of necessity but also supposedly preferring them to other foodstuffs – the acreage devoted to wheat far exceeded that given to potatoes. Wheat was a cash crop, a cash crop that supported Irish landlords, merchants and British bread-dependant consumers. Hence allowing wheat exports, especially after what had been a fine harvest, would be of no consequence.<sup>43</sup> Or so the theory went. This would later have public consequences as the theories of political economy were more doggedly and ideologically followed by Russell's Whig administration than Peel's Tories. By 1849 as, George Bernstein has put it, "the British were sick of the whole business and were reluctant to spend any more of their money on a people who would not help themselves."<sup>44</sup> Non-interventionism was thought to be "justified" by the political economy policy prescription of *laissez-faire* and was supported by the "famine mythology" that nothing could be done, that the deaths were acts of God.

Towards gathering evidence as to the actuality of scarcity and the severity of the blight, in October 1845 Peel instituted a Scientific Commission and accordingly sent two scientific advisors to Dublin. Their reading of the evidence in eventuality was proved wrong, the claim that five-sixths of the crop would be lost thankfully being unduly pessimistic. Their claim was, however, at least in part responsible for a shift in policy.<sup>45</sup> Realizing the potential severity of the situation, in November 1845 it was agreed that a new approach was to be implemented from the following spring, when it was thought food supplies would in all probability become perilously short. Mirroring government responses to the 1816 crisis and building upon relief offered by the 118 operable poor law workhouses, Peel instituted a program of public works to employ those out of work, the secret purchase of £100,000 of Indian corn (maize) from the United States, and the creation of a relief commission.<sup>46</sup> The impact of these policies is hard to precisely discern, but it is worth noting that the one hundred or so local relief committees (most being based in the southwest) had to apply to the Dublin-based Relief Commission for Indian corn, and, if successful, were to *sell* it at market prices, later changed to cost price and in cases of extreme distress *gratis*. The Relief Commission was also slow to act, something not helped by the constant and resented interference of Trevelyan, the permanent secretary to the Treasury under both Peel and Russell's governments. Slowness as a result of monitoring was also a problem that afflicted the special relief department of the Board of Public Works administering public work programs.<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, food depots supplying the local committees were not to open until May, notwithstanding that localized shortages were felt from March. Food riots followed in Carrick-on-Suir, Clonmel and Tipperary targeting merchants and forestallers charging "famine" prices for wheat. Notwithstanding their being put down by the military and provoking strong condemnation in parliament, they did lead to some depots being opened earlier than had otherwise been planned.<sup>48</sup> The local committees also had some success in raising financial support through local subscriptions, the £98,000 collected in this way supplemented by a grant of £65,914 from the Lord Lieutenant.<sup>49</sup> While the importation of Indian corn was not meant as a direct substitute for potatoes – Peel's intention was that it would help to keep the price of food down and deter hoarding by speculators – it did act as a substitute. Albeit one popularly loathed as evidenced in the popular satirical name given to maize, "Peel's Brimstone."<sup>50</sup>

Together, such measures (notwithstanding the myriad problems including administrative frauds on the public works that were widely publicized in the British press) were effective in preventing famine deaths, though badly stored and prepared Indian corn did lead to widespread

illness. Against this “success,” it has been claimed that a consensus emerged in British public and political opinion. The efforts and expenses of the Westminster government had allowed, so the argument went, Irish landlords to shirk from their duty. Peel’s package was therefore just another sticking plaster against the pressing need to reform Ireland. Moreover, the giving of relief had supposedly acted to depress local stimuli to action.<sup>51</sup>

The blight reappeared in July 1846 and by mid September the whole country was affected. Coinciding with a British political crisis and the fall of Peel’s government in the fallout after the passing of the Importation Act on May 16 that repealed the Corn Laws, relief policy initially remained unaltered. Besides, Peel’s policy of importing Indian corn was scheduled to end on August 15 and as a temporary expedient was never intended to continue after that date, the government now acting only as the supplier of last resort. Indeed, only a handful of depots remained open, and these in the worst affected areas of the west.<sup>52</sup> Yet against mounting evidence of likely chronic scarcity, the policy adopted by Russell’s incoming (minority) Whig administration proved even more doctrinaire and inflexible than Peel’s government. Considerable power now rested in the hands of Trevelyan and Charles Wood at the Treasury. Working from a belief that Irish taxpayers as opposed to the Treasury should be liable for relief costs, Russell’s government not only decided *not* to renew the import of Indian corn but also determined that public works should be funded through Poor Law taxation. Wages on public works were also to be set below market rates, though such were the delays created by Treasury-imposed checks before works could start and so late were payments often made that what little potential positive effects of the scheme were further checked.<sup>53</sup>

Despite this and that in some places individuals refused to work on the schemes such was the pay and the conditions of work – the Treasury in such cases decreeing that the particular project would stop until all “outrages” had stopped – the demand for public work exceeded supply in the exceptionally harsh winter. By January 1847 570,000 men were so employed, a figure that rose to 734,000 in March, thus at its peak one in three men and roughly two million people were supported by the public works program.<sup>54</sup> But against this level of support, in January 1847 the British government resolved to end the program of public works and by the autumn make the poor law responsible for the maintenance of all individuals, a system of public soup kitchens to meet needs in the interim. To this end, a 20 percent reduction in public works was imposed on March 20, 1847, with a sliding scale of further cuts following, this notwithstanding that public soup kitchens in many places were not yet operative. In this way, so Russell’s government desired, ultimately the needs of the suffering Irish would be met by Irish taxpayers, the market for foodstuffs left to operate without state intervention, and Irish society and the economy would be transformed. That winter, with the ports continuing to export huge amounts of corn and livestock to Britain and even America, the Irish constabulary estimated that 400,000 individuals died through want of food.<sup>55</sup> As the Irish radical newspaper *The Nation* put it, the abandonment of public works was a “murderous absurdity,” evidence of the British government’s “utter apathy to the tremendous responsibility with which they are trifling.”<sup>56</sup>

Against the slow withdrawal of the *direct* relief efforts of the British state, charity was not only encouraged but directly supported by Russell’s government. As noted, the landlord-dominated local relief committees had by August 1846 raised £98,000 in donations, but this represented a fraction of what was being spent, let alone that needed to prevent a humanitarian disaster.<sup>57</sup> Moreover, in Britain, so Peel had believed, there would be little private sympathy, and thus no efforts were made to stimulate charity. If the Whigs too were slow to recognise the possibilities of harnessing charitable support, this soon changed. Through the influence of the Indian Relief Fund – which raised funds for Ireland in India and Ceylon – and pleas from Anglican clergy in Ireland, Trevelyan began to conceive that charity could provide an important

safety net, which would allow the government to, as Gray puts it, “adhere rigidly to its relief rules.”<sup>58</sup> Evangelical morality could thus save political economy. Providing Irish landowners set the example, all would follow out of a sense of brotherly and sisterly compassion.

The British Association for the Relief of Extreme Distress in the Remote Parishes of Ireland and Scotland was founded in the City of London in January 1847. The Association was under the immediate lead of chair Thomas Baring, of the self-named bank that had earlier purchased the Indian corn on behalf of Peel’s government, but had been founded at Trevelyan and Russell’s instigation.<sup>59</sup> The (publicly stated) aim was to aid the poor “who are beyond the reach of government” with food, clothes and fuel.<sup>60</sup> Advice was also taken as to the best means to proceed in Ireland from the most important pre-existing relief organisation, the Central Relief Committee, itself founded in Dublin in November 1846 by the Society of Friends and active in raising money from their members in both Ireland and England.<sup>61</sup> In support of this new British charitable initiative, the Queen issued an official letter in January 1847 calling for collections in every parish in the land, this supported by sermons in parish churches. The effect, as has been well documented, was immediate and emphatic. Personal donations from Queen Victoria of £2,000 – her support doubled due to the inclusion of Scotland in the scheme – and her ministers (Russell giving £300) made giving to Irish charity both an act of religious duty *and* fashionable.<sup>62</sup> By the time the BRA finished its activities in the summer of 1848 it had raised £470,041 1s. 2d., of which £391,700 17s. 8d. was expended in Ireland.<sup>63</sup> Over fifteen thousand donations had been made, including from British corporations, universities, the British army, as well as from overseas, mostly from British colonies.<sup>64</sup> Relief, it was resolved, was to be given in food rather than money, though in some areas this rule could not be adhered to as no food was available to purchase. In the spring of 1847 seed oats were also distributed in the west in a further departure from stated policy. Local committees were created, food depots founded, and agents and even the Royal Navy engaged to help determine need and distribute relief. Most of its money was expended that spring and summer of 1847, thereafter on the introduction of the Poor Law Extension Act in August its activities were confined to the most distressed unions, continuing until July 1848 when its funds were finally exhausted.<sup>65</sup>

### **British public responses and relief, 1845-47**

Given the ravages of *phytophthora infestans* in England and Scotland, initial commentary in the British press about the effects of the blight in Ireland were quick to draw parallels but also to forewarn of singularly devastating consequences given the reliance of Irish cottiers on the potato. As a letter to the *Cambridge Independent Press* suggested, the on-going public scandal over the fact that inmates of the Andover Union workhouse in Hampshire had been reduced to supplementing their potato-heavy diet by gnawing green bones was a ready warning of the reliance on the potato. England might be “far removed at present from the horrors of [...] the depopulation of famine,” but this served as a warning.<sup>66</sup> More directly, as the *Wiltshire Independent* reported, “Ireland is threatened with famine, not merely that periodical dearth between the potato-crops every year which puts a third part of the people into a state of destitution, but a failure of the potato-crop itself.”<sup>67</sup> Detailing cases of crop failure throughout Ireland, the piece concluded by predicting that as “[t]he consequences of such a failure of the staple food in Ireland are terrible to contemplate [...]. Government will of course take some steps.”<sup>68</sup>

With the notable exception of the Chartist press – of which more below – anti-Tory newspapers invariably suggested the solution to the likely crisis was to repeal the Corn Laws and throw open the ports. Even some parts of the provincial and agrarian Tory press suggested that some limited, targeted opening of the Irish ports to allow relief for the sufferers of Ireland was laudable. As the editor of the *Ipswich Journal* put it: “[I]mportation made under the proper

regulations [...] will excite no regret, or cause complaints from the agricultural interest."<sup>69</sup> The temporary repeal of the Corn Laws would however offer *no* "relief" to the Irish poor. The paper of the Hampshire landowners, likewise believed it was "an absurdity" opening the Irish ports for the import of corn because those in need "cannot afford to purchase it."<sup>70</sup> Instead, relief would come from "the [charitable] benevolence of the people of England."<sup>71</sup>

The loudest voices though were those clamouring to open the ports as a prelude to (or part of an immediate) Corn Law repeal. Richard Cobden, co-founder and chief propagandist of the Anti-Corn Law League (ACCL), was quick in the autumn of 1845 to offer free trade as the solution to the failure of the potato crop, "starvation staring in the face" of the people of the "unhappy sister island."<sup>72</sup> Such commentaries, not least his speech given at the Great League Meeting at Manchester on October 28, 1845, were widely publicized and Cobden's argument and language adopted in the editorials and published letters of the pro-Corn Law repeal press. A speaker at a "great free trade meeting" at Taunton in late December even went as far as to claim that campaigning for the repeal of the Corn Laws was a "noble struggle" for the good it would be in opening up the Irish ports to avoid "all their horrors."<sup>73</sup> Speakers at a further Manchester meeting in December again spoke in emotive terms about the likely sufferings of the Irish poor and (tellingly) on the negative impact the blight had made on Manchester-Irish trade.<sup>74</sup> A £50,000 subscription was duly raised—not to relieve the Irish but to support the ACCL's campaign. Similarly at a public meeting in Sheffield to consider the repeal of the Corn Laws, in the main speech Alderman Dunn played on the emotional solidarities of the largely working-class audience by, when mentioning the state of the poor in Ireland, proclaiming "he could never do so without feelings that he could scarcely describe."<sup>75</sup> While the first speech of a public meeting at Leeds on December 3, 1845—postponed from noon to 7pm so as to enable the "working classes" to attend—opened by making reference to the state of the hungry in Ireland and England, it asserted that the poor in both countries the victims of "class" legislation.<sup>76</sup> This belief was 'confirmed' by comments made by the Dukes of Richmond and Norfolk at a meeting of Sussex agriculturalists at Steyning, near Brighton, in early December. Richmond, improbably, suggested that laborers to 'uphold the flags of Nelson and Wellington' and import their own potatoes from Portugal, while Norfolk, explosively, recommended that the Irish eat their diseased potatoes with curry powder. Norfolk's comments quickly gained notoriety throughout Britain and Ireland, giving further credence to the emergent popular belief that the landed classes of both islands little understood or cared for the hungry working poor. The situation was especially pressing given that, as the Exeter press saw it, Ireland was 'bordering upon a state of absolute famine' with the 'same evil' also threatening England.<sup>77</sup>

Blight in Ireland was thus read as a warning for England's domestic situation—note, reporting on the possible effects of the blight in Scotland figured little in the initial English commentary—and mobilized as evidential ammunition in the increasingly vituperative battle between those for and against the repeal of the Corn Laws.<sup>78</sup> No less vitriol-laden was the relationship between the ACCL and the Chartist leadership, a dynamic which can be read as having impacted upon Chartist responses to the blight and emergent famine in Ireland.<sup>79</sup> While the ACCL swiftly and decisively attached themselves to the issue, prominent Chartists were more equivocal. Chartism had a loose grip on Ireland, only flourishing in Dublin (and then in partnership with the Irish Universal Suffrage Association) between 1841 and 1844. Thereafter, the most obvious connection was through Irish migrants in Britain subscribing to the Charter and assuming positions of power in the movement, notably founder and editor of the Leeds-based mouthpiece of the movement the *Northern Star* Feargus O'Connor, and advocate of the Chartist Land Plan Bronterre O'Brien. Moreover, in matters Irish there was considerable division between prominent Chartists, with dissent over O'Connor's prominent use of the *Northern Star* to espouse the repeal of the Union.<sup>80</sup>

The *Northern Star* first reported the existence of the blight in the Channel Island and south and west England on August 30, 1845, but it was not until November 1 that the paper first alluded to the possibility of a famine in Ireland and England.<sup>81</sup> This, and subsequent reporting, were used to attack both the ACCL—accused of using the “crisis” to advance the interests of “capital” against those of “labor”—and Peel’s mercantile and colonial policy. O’Connor also used the opportunity of a speech in London on November 5, 1845—his first in Britain that autumn—to mobilize the blight as evidence of the need for land reform and support for the Chartist Land Plan.<sup>82</sup> Beyond opportunism to push particular agendas, the early Chartist response was best summed up in an open letter from O’Connor to “the Imperial Chartists” published in the *Northern Star*: “the excitement of free trade, the militia, war, famine, and the Queen’s speech, instead of diverting your attention from that all-important subject [land reform], will rather lead you to a consideration of it as the means of making you independent of all casualties, whims, caprices, and class legislation.”<sup>83</sup> Even as late as the May Day Chartist rally of 1847 when the full enormity of the effects of famine in Ireland were evident, the response of O’Connor and other prominent Chartists was to espouse the criticality of the Land Plan as a solution to the Malthusian check.<sup>84</sup>

This is not to say that ACCL and Chartist commentary, speechifying and reporting were devoid of genuine sympathy towards the Irish poor. Indeed, what united pro- and anti-Corn Law repealers and Chartists alike was an apparent genuine fear for the human consequences of blight and government inaction. From early 1846, almost without exception each issue of the *Northern Star* made some reference to the effects of the blight (both in Ireland and elsewhere) and the actual and likely effects on the Irish poor. Yet outside of reprinting news from the Irish press, such reports invariably were used to make a broader political point. Thus on February 14, 1846, a report on the appearance in “many districts” of “pestilence” (“ever the attendant of famine”) juxtaposed “the assaults of the hungry” with “sleek and fat horses [...], a bloated police force, a gorged soldiery, bursting war horses.”<sup>85</sup> At the same time Peel was accused by O’Connor of a similar opportunism in using the pretext of the social dislocations of scarcity and the rise in agrarian protest to introduce to Parliament in May 1846 the Irish Coercion Bill. Ultimately the bill failed and with it brought down Peel’s government.<sup>86</sup>

Nor were other public journals entirely without feeling in their reporting, but, as with Chartist commentary, at least before October 1846 reports on the state of rural Ireland were often used to offer a wider critique of British mercantile, agrarian and colonial policy. Thus the Church and State Toryism of the *Salisbury Journal* berated Peel for the state of Ireland:

If any thing were wanting to demonstrate Sir Robert Peel’s incompetence to carry on her Majesty’s Government in Ireland, it might be found in the present state of that kingdom. [With] rampant and furious [...] Orangemen in Ulster, and O’Connell and his followers [...] howl[ing] for repeal of the Union in the south, Ireland was out of control. Against this, [f]amine, with all its attendant horrors, glares at them [Peel’s cabinet].<sup>87</sup>

The solution, however, was not “English charity, Saxon benevolence,” as in the past, but instead the Irish Poor Law and the “proprietors of the soil [...] exposed to the indignation and disgust of the British public,” who themselves had grown rich “by exactions from these poor creatures.”<sup>88</sup> From a different political perspective, Peel was also subject to the scorn of the *Fife Herald* in late October for having sent only the two scientific commissioners to Ireland to investigate the “disease” in the potato crop.<sup>89</sup> Less obviously wracked by ideological feeling was a commentary in the *Leeds Times* on 8 November 1846 bemoaning that against famine—“already a pressing and palpable thing”—the poor were suffering as “Ireland is being drained of her best

food to supply the wants of England and Scotland."<sup>90</sup> At the same time, Scottish potatoes were also still being exported to the Nordic countries and Baltic states. Through such trading *England* was again averting famine, but Ireland was still subject to the structured "perennial famine" which kept a third of its population in a state of constant hunger and starvation and Scotland likely subject to like disaster.<sup>91</sup> Or as the *Cambridge Independent Press* put it, "it is an extraordinary fact, that while the people of the south of Ireland are threatened with famine, the quays of Limerick and Waterford are crowded with vessels taking grain and other provisions for England."<sup>92</sup> As Peter Gurney has suggested, in such ways the 'politics of provisions' remained center of the British political stage in late 1845, the example of Ireland a warning to England.<sup>93</sup>

Such early reports betray a degree of confusion as to the actual and likely impact of the blight on the people of Ireland and as to the best prescription to aid the problem. This was not even divided on political (or Corn Law repeal) lines. For every Tory press assertion that this was Ireland's problem, came commentaries, such as that in the Tory *Hampshire Advertiser*, that the people of England had a charitable duty to help.<sup>94</sup> The only explicit *call* to raise subscriptions to aid those suffering from the early effects of the blight I have uncovered though related not to the Irish poor but instead the hungry of Scotland.<sup>95</sup>

During the winter of 1845-6 this might have been a function of reports acting to reduce the humanitarian impulse when suggesting that the initial fears as to the universality and severity of the blight had not been realized. This and the eventual government relief policies evidently impacted public willingness to collect money to support Ireland. Nor should we underestimate the potential impact of the ACLL campaign to raise £250,000 through subscriptions, not least given that this campaigning was strongest in those places with the large migrant Irish communities and thus also where metropole-colony solidarities were strongest.<sup>96</sup> In the first half of 1846 other dynamics militated against the raising of public subscriptions. The reporting of abuses of state-funded public work schemes was, as noted, widespread, as were reports of agrarian protest and landlord evictions. Collectively such reports were taken by much of the press as evidence of purblind landlords and violent mendicant peasants, of a country beyond the help of further charitable giving.<sup>97</sup> This was best exemplified by Home Secretary Graham placing before Parliament on June 8, 1846 a bill by the name of "Protection of Life (Ireland)," concerned not with famine relief measures but instead the means to put down "agrarian insurrection."<sup>98</sup> And this followed parliamentary utterances to the tune that past English subscriptions had simply found their way directly into the pockets of Irish landlords, their exported corn being purchased in England by subscriptions and shipped back to Ireland. As Peel had stated in the House of Commons after the Easter recess: "I affirm that the responsibility rests rather upon those who are resident on the spot, and upon those who, not being resident, have a still moral obligation to transmit their subscriptions through their resident brethren."<sup>99</sup> The duty was resolutely not that of the British people.

The depth of feeling on issue was best summed up by an editorial of the independent, politically liberal *Bristol Mercury* in April 1846. The British government, it noted, had intervened in providing Indian corn but could not, so it had professed, undertake to feed the Irish people, this after all being the duty of Irish landlords. What stores it had left were being held, for it foresaw "a far worse time coming," and this retention was thus, as the paper asserted, the "humane course."<sup>100</sup> Irish landlords, by way of contrast, had raised only a "few paltry hundreds" through subscriptions, even though the mechanisms to collect funds were in place via Daniel O'Connell's Union "repeal rent" fund.<sup>101</sup> England, it thundered, was "'looked [to] for everything – and blamed for everything."<sup>102</sup>

Beyond the emotive rhetoric and the misinformation regarding indigenous relief-raising, the fact that such reports even appeared in the politically liberal press acted powerfully to

undermine British public action. This was explicitly, if sheepishly, acknowledged in reports of the “munificent contribution” from India for the relief of the Irish poor.<sup>103</sup> As the *Morning Post* related: “Whatever distrust may have been entertained at home at the representation made by the ‘Mansion-House Committee’ on the subject of Irish distress, there can be no second opinion as to the noble generosity which has prompted the remittance of no less a sum than three thousand pounds for its relief.”<sup>104</sup> A “respectable meeting” had been held in Calcutta on January 2, 1846, a general committee formed and various members of the Irish-note, not British-nobility, clergy, and academy invited to become trustees of the “Bengal Subscription” and responsible for the distribution of the funds.<sup>105</sup> By January 21, 1846, the subscription amounted to 39,000 rupees, with a further subscription started in Madras with hopes of the like happening in Bombay. As Kinealy notes, subscribers were supposed to be limited to British and Irish settlers, though some Indians also offered their support, the Calcutta Committee (a.k.a. the Irish Relief Fund and the Indian Relief Fund) expressing their wish that even the smallest donations were welcome.<sup>106</sup> At a distance, if not at home, the British *did* raise relief funds by subscription before the prompt of the government-backed scheme.

The tenor of British public reactions changed markedly in late summer when the potato crop was found to be an almost total failure. “The people of this country,” warned the editorial in the London *Standard* on September 3, 1846, “must prepare for exertions to save millions of our fellow subjects.”<sup>107</sup> While stopping short of advocating public subscriptions – though the subscription of 1822 had been a “glorious monument to British generosity” – the columns of the paper in the ensuing days marked a notable shift in tone.<sup>108</sup> By the beginning of October the absolute certainty of a humanitarian disaster prompted a shift in British popular opinion and action. Well-attended public meetings to consider what means to adopt to alleviate the suffering of the Irish poor were held in London and entered into subscriptions.<sup>109</sup> Concurrently, the National Club (founded in London the previous June with the aim of upholding “the Protestant Principles of the Constitution, and for Raising the Moral and Social Condition of the People” in Britain and Ireland) unilaterally acted. It resolved in “this frightful emergency” to act on “the impulse of their own feelings and on the suggestions of many” to open a general subscription to support both the Irish and the poor in the Scottish Highlands.<sup>110</sup> A large committee of noblemen and MPs was duly formed to determine upon the distribution of subscribed funds, and to provide against “imposition” from claimants. This news prompted the *Standard* to change its line on subscriptions: “they who feel and rejoice in ‘the blessedness of giving, may now indulge in their glorious disposition with a full assurance that they can do nothing but good.’”<sup>111</sup> By mid November the National Club had already raised over £900.<sup>112</sup>

This and the aforementioned other early October London subscriptions were by no means the only such funds raised before the foundation of the BRA in January 1847. While London was to remain the central focus for British relief efforts – something acknowledged by a deputation from the Cork Relief Committee being dispatched to London in November to solicit subscriptions – other local subscriptions were also launched.<sup>113</sup> While the archive is no doubt defective in recording such ad-hoc, localized collections, it is striking that those schemes reported figured heavily in Lancashire and Yorkshire, counties with large migrant Irish populations and strong cultural and trade links with Ireland. Bristol, another large maritime city with a large Irish population and a strong Irish trade, followed suit in raising a subscription in early January 1847.<sup>114</sup> Concurrently, in December the Quakers also entered into a national subscription in Britain to aid the Central Committee in Dublin in establishing soup kitchens. By mid December it was reported that £20,000 had been raised, of which £1,000 alone came from the “good givers” of Leeds.<sup>115</sup>

## Conclusion

In many ways initial British public reactions to the famine mirrored those of the Peel's Tory administration and those of the wider Imperial Parliament. Blight, and its likely attendant effects, was at once a domestic *and* a colonial issue. It was something that united Britain and Ireland, for the *fear* of famine was not something confined to Ireland but something sensed in England and absolutely felt in the Scottish Highlands. The demotic experience of the "Hungry 40s" in Britain mediated the understanding of the plight of more distant kin.<sup>116</sup> But while shared, lived experiences and an emergent laboring cosmopolitanism (as given expression in much Chartist writing) underpinned empathy for the hungry Irish in some places, it is important to note that there continued to be an entrenched culture of xenophobia.<sup>117</sup> Attacks on Irish migrant workers, for instance, remained an important part of working culture into the 1840s.<sup>118</sup>

In the case of the major centers of Irish migrant populations, the experience of Irish hunger was not shared at a distance but something shared immediately and in place. At the same time against this Unionist interpretation, the wider political rhetoric was not that this was a British problem, a problem of the united countries of the Union. Rather, it was represented as a colonial problem, a consequence of the structural problems with the Irish economy and society. Together these dynamics meant that the undoubted deep human feeling for the sufferings of the Irish poor evident in the public response was tempered by the belief that, at best, this was either another false alarm or, at worst, this was something the Irish had brought upon themselves, a belief later given scriptural frame in the "providential" reading of famine deaths. Typified by the responses of both the ACCL and Chartist campaigners, the problem was therefore, as Gray and Nally amongst others have suggested, an opportunity to restructure Ireland. To change Ireland from a problem colony to an effective and profitable part of Britain.<sup>119</sup> This reading is given further depth by the fact that whereas before the autumn of 1846 popular subscriptions for the relief of the hungry Irish were not raised in Britain, they *were* raised in other British colonies. Such were the bonds of solidarity.

In addition, it is important to underline that beyond hardened positions, when the evidential realities of "pestilence and famine" in Ireland became irrefutable, the response was unequivocal. Against the brutality of the policy response of Russell's government—and before the Treasury-sanctioned launch of the BRA campaign—subscriptions for the relief of the famine Irish *were* raised in Britain. Beyond the coordinated activities of the National Club though, it is impossible to get at the depth of this subscription movement by virtue of its ad-hoc, uncoordinated nature, and as such we will in all probability never know how universal or important it was.<sup>120</sup> Yet the existence alone of such pre-BRA local subscriptions is telling. It speaks directly to the existence of a humanitarian concern motivated not by government, royal speeches, popular political movements, religious foundations, or even charities, but something moved by a sense of colonial responsibility and human solidarity. It is important to note though that this corrective assertion of empathy does not act to diminish the importance of the popular fervor manipulated by the BRA subscription. Critically, nor does it reduce the human impact of the 'compassion fatigue' that followed the BRA, the discourse of the British press and political debate shifting from sympathy to asserting that resurgent Irish Nationalism and rural rebellion was evidence of "monstrous ingratitude."<sup>121</sup> Rather, it reminds us that there was not one British response but many, changing both over time, and between different places and groups.

As noted, the literature on this devastating, politically framed famine has since the early 1990s developed at pace, addressing gaps in our knowledge, asking new questions of the archive, and showing a more nuanced, sophisticated understanding of the catastrophe. Historical geographers in particular have contributed massively to these new understandings, visualizing

the effects of the famine and placing the events of 1845-9 into a wider theoretical and international context.<sup>122</sup> In this spirit, this paper has shown that further nuances and complexities can be fruitfully examined from a historical-geographical perspective. Beyond showing that the British popular reaction went beyond politically manipulated and controlled, this paper also demonstrates the need to look not only at the wider colonial landscape but also at the contours of reaction and response in the metropole itself.

## NOTES

- 1 Maureen Murphy, ed., *Annals of the Famine in Ireland: Asenath Nicholson* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 1998), 77. Nicholson's account was originally published in London in 1850 and in New York the following year.
- 2 Letter to the editor of the *Freeman's Journal*, 8 January 1847; quoted in Cormac Ó Gráda, *Black '47 and Beyond: The Great Irish Famine in History, Economy and Memory* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999), 77.
- 3 For an important recent study of the memorialization of the famine, see Emily Mark-Fitzgerald, *Commemorating the Irish Famine: Memory and the Monument* (Liverpool, United Kingdom: Liverpool University Press, 2013).
- 4 For a recent geographical analysis of the impact of the Great Famine on Irish demographics, see A. Stewart Fotheringham, Mary Kelly, and Martin Charlton, "[The Demographic Impacts of the Irish famine: Towards a Greater Geographical Understanding](#)," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 38, no. 2 (2013): 221-37.
- 5 Mark-Fitzgerald, *Commemorating the Irish Famine*, 2.
- 6 Christine Kinealy, *This Great Calamity: The Irish Famine 1845-52* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 2006), xviii-xix.
- 7 Margaret Crawford, *Famine: The Irish Experience, 900-1900* (Edinburgh, United Kingdom: John Donald Publishing 1989); Peter Gray, *The Irish Famine* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1995); Gray, *Famine, Land and Politics: British Government and Irish Society 1843-1850* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1999); Kinealy, *Death-Dealing Famine: The Great Hunger in Ireland* (London: Pluto Press, 1997); Kinealy, *The Great Famine in Ireland: Impact, Ideology and Rebellion* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002); Kinealy, *This Great Calamity; Charity and the Great Hunger in Ireland: the Kindness of Strangers* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013); Joel Mokyr, *Why Ireland Starved: A Quantitative and Analytical History of the Irish Economy, 1800-1850* second edition (London: Routledge, 2005); Ó Gráda, *The Great Irish Famine* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Ó Gráda, *Black '47 and Beyond*; Tim Pat Coogan, *The Famine Plot: England's Role in Ireland's Greatest Tragedy* (Basingstoke, United Kingdom: Palgrave, 2013); Mark-Fitzgerald, *Commemorating the Irish Famine*; David Nally, *Human Encumbrances: Political Violence and the Great Irish Famine* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010); John Crowley, William J. Smyth, Mike Murphy, eds., *Atlas of the Great Irish Famine* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2012).
- 8 Kinealy, *Charity and the Great Hunger in Ireland*.
- 9 James Donnelly, "'Irish Property Must Pay for Irish Poverty': British Public Opinion and the Great Irish Famine," in Chris Morash and Richard Hayes, eds., *"Fearful Realities": New Perspectives on the Famine* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1996), 60-76.
- 10 Donnelly, "Irish Property Must Pay for Irish Poverty"; Kinealy, *Charity and the Great Hunger in Ireland*, chs. 8 and 9. Also of note is David Nally's study of Thomas Carlyle's writings on his travels through Ireland from September 1846, though this is not a study of public reactions *per se*: "['Eternity's Commissioner': Thomas Carlyle, the Great Irish Famine and the geopolitics of travel](#)," *Journal of Historical Geography* 32, no. 3 (2006): 313-335.

- 11 Donnelly, "Irish Property Must Pay for Irish Poverty."
- 12 *Cork Examiner*, 20 January 1845, 2.
- 13 Report from the *Banner of Ulster* reprinted in *Freeman's Journal*, 6 August 1845, 4.
- 14 *Leeds Times*, 9 August 1845, 4.
- 15 *Belfast News-Letter*, 2 September 1845, 4.
- 16 *Dublin Evening Post*; quoted in *Belfast News-Letter*, 2 September 1845, 4.
- 17 *Limerick Chronicle*; quoted in *Belfast News-Letter*, 2 September 1845, 4.
- 18 *Cork Examiner*, 20 August 1845, 4.
- 19 *Sussex Advertiser*, 12 August 1845, 2.
- 20 *Morning Post*, 15 August 1845, 2; including report from *Kentish Observer*.
- 21 *London Standard*, 19 August 1845, 4; including report from *Dover Chronicle*. "Some 'failures' of the potato harvest had been noticed in Devon in late July, though whether this was due to the same blight seems improbable," *Sherborne Mercury*, 2 August 1845, 4.
- 22 *Sussex Advertiser*, 19 August 1845, 2; *Morning Chronicle*, 20 August 1845, 6; *Cork Examiner*, 22 August 1845, 2 (including letter to the editor from Body and Co., Mark Lane, London).
- 23 *Cork Examiner*, 27 August 1845, 4; including report from the *Gardener's Chronicle*; *Royal Cornwall Gazette*, 29 August, 3; *Sherborne Mercury*, 30 August 1845, 4.
- 24 Kinealy, *This Great Calamity*, 31.
- 25 *Cork Examiner*, 29 August 1845, 3.
- 26 E. Charles Nelson, *The Cause of the Calamity: Potato Blight in Ireland 1845-7, and the Role of the National Botanic Gardens, Glasnevin* (Dublin: Stationery Office, 1995): 5. As Nuala Johnson notes, under the lead of head gardener David Moore, Glasnevin became a major center of study into the blight, though the various experiments into prevention and cures ultimately had no positive effect: *Nature Displaced, Nature Displayed: Order and Beauty in Botanical Gardens* (London: IB Tauris, 2011), 60-63.
- 27 *Cork Examiner*, 10 September 1845, 3.
- 28 *Dublin Evening Post*, 6 September 1845, quoted in Austin Bourke, "The Use of the Potato Crop in Pre-Famine Ireland," *Journal of the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland* 21 (1968): 72-96, 72; *Waterford Freeman*, 6 September 1845, quoted in *Cork Examiner*, 10 September 1845, 3.
- 29 *Cork Examiner*, 10 September 1845, 3; *Cork Examiner* 15 September 1845, 2; *Freeman's Journal*, 17 September 1845, 1. See also: Bourke, "The Use of the Potato Crop."
- 30 For references on revision and counter-revision, see note 7 above. Amartya Sen, *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation* (Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 1990 [1981]).
- 31 Five thousand famine refugees alone were buried at Grosse-Île in Quebec in 1847, this being the largest famine gravesite outside of Ireland: Gilbert Tucker, "[The Famine Immigration to Canada, 1847](#)," *American Historical Review*, 36, no. 3 (1931): 533-49. For an excellent study of the public health implications of the arrival of the "famine Irish" in Liverpool, see Gerry Kearns and Paul Laxton, "Ethnic Groups as Public Health Hazards: the Famine Irish in Liverpool and Lazzaretto Politics," in Esteban Rodríguez-Ocaña, ed., *The Politics of the Healthy Life: An International Perspective* (Sheffield, United Kingdom: EAHMH Publications, 2003): 13-40.
- 32 On the structure of Irish landholding and its agricultural and social effects, see Robert C. Shipkey, *Robert Peel's Irish Policy: 1812-1846* (New York: Garland, 1987): 472-477; Gray, *Famine, Land and Politics*, *passim*.
- 33 Paul A. Pickering and Alex Tyrrell, *The People's Bread: A History of the Anti-Corn Law League* (Leicester, United Kingdom: Leicester University Press, 2000).

- 34 Shipkey, *Robert Peel's Irish Policy*, 468, 361.
- 35 On the aftermath of the United Irishmen's 1798 rebellion, see James Patterson's excellent *In The Wake of the Great Rebellion. Republicanism, Agrarianism and Banditry in Ireland after 1798* (Manchester, United Kingdom: Manchester University Press, 2008). For the Young Ireland "movement," see Richard Davis, *The Young Ireland Movement* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1988); Gerry Kearns, "Time and Some Citizenship: Nationalism and Thomas Davis," *Bullán: An Irish Studies Review* 5, no. 2 (2001): 23-54
- 36 Gray, *Famine, Land and Politics*, 119.
- 37 Nally, "[The Biopolitics of Food Provisioning](#)," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 36, no. 1 (2011): 37-53, 40.
- 38 Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France 1977-1978* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 1.
- 39 Nally, "The Biopolitics of Food Provisioning," 40. For David Keen's conception: *The Benefits of Famine: A Political Economy of Famine and Relief in Southwestern Sudan, 1983-1989* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994).
- 40 British Library, Add Mss. 40451, fo. 286, Sir James Graham to Sir Robert Peel, 18 September 1845.
- 41 Shipkey, *Peel's Irish Policy*, 468-9.
- 42 *Ibid.*, 470; Kinealy, *A Death-Dealing Famine*, 56.
- 43 Iain McLean and Camilla Bustani, "[Irish Potatoes and British Politics: Interests, Ideology, Heresthetic and the Repeal of the Corn Laws](#)," *Political Studies* 47, no. 2 (1999): 817-839. Kinealy, *A Death-Dealing Famine*, 49, 60.
- 44 George Bernstein, "['Liberals, the Irish Famine and the Role of the State'](#)," *Irish Historical Studies*, 29, no. 116 (1995): 513-536, 536.
- 45 Kinealy, *A Death-Dealing Famine*, 53-56. A further survey was carried out by Irish constabulary in March 1846. The blight was found to have had the worst impact in Armagh, Clare, Kilkenny, Louth, Monaghan, and Waterford where losses were in excess of two fifths of the crop.
- 46 *Ibid.*, 56-57; Kinealy, *Charity and the Great Hunger in Ireland*, 18-23. On the state of the Irish Poor Law see: Peter Gray, *The Making of the Irish Poor Law, 1815-43* (Manchester, United Kingdom: Manchester University Press, 2009). It is important to note that *initially* import duties on Indian corn were not respite, for, in the words of Home Secretary Graham, "if we opened the ports to maize duty-free, most popular and irresistible arguments present themselves why flour and oatmeal, the staple of the food of man, should not be restricted in its supply by artificial means, while Heaven has withheld from an entire people its accustomed sustenance [...]. Can these duties, once remitted by Act of Parliament, be ever again reimposed?" Graham, to Peel, 13 October 1845, in Charles Stuart Parker, ed., *Life and Letters of Sir James Graham, Second Baronet of Netherby* (London: John Murray, 1907), 115.
- 47 The best study of the administration of the public works during the famine remains Arthur Griffiths, "[The Irish Board of Works during the Famine Years](#)," *Historical Journal* 13, no. 4 (1970): 634-652.
- 48 Gray, *Famine, Land and Politics*, 120; Kinealy, *A Death-Dealing Famine*, 61-63.
- 49 Instructions to the Committees of Relief Districts, extracted from Minutes of the Proceedings of the Commissioners appointed in reference to the apprehended scarcity, British Parliamentary Papers 1846, vol. 37 [171].
- 50 Kinealy, *A Death-Dealing Famine*, 62, 64.
- 51 *Ibid.*, 63-4.
- 52 Gray, *Famine, Land and Politics*, pp.252-3; Kinealy, *A Death Dealing Famine*, 77.

- 53 Poor Employment Act, 9 and 10 Victoria (1846), c.107; Kinealy, *A Death Dealing Famine*, 67, 71-72, 73. On the contested role and impact of Trevelyan, see Robin Haines, *Charles Trevelyan and the Great Irish Famine* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2004).
- 54 Kinealy, *This Great Calamity*, 90-106. For a detailed analysis of the numbers employed in public works, and the variation by region, see: *Ibid.*, 363-5.
- 55 *Times*, 12 March 1847, 6; Kinealy, *A Death Dealing Famine*, 74-75, 79-80.
- 56 *The Nation*, 27 March 1847, cited in Kinealy, *A Death Dealing Famine*, 75.
- 57 But as Peter Gray has asserted, despite such efforts they still came in for considerable criticism in the British media: *Famine, Land and Politics*, 132.
- 58 Indian Relief Fund, *Distress in Ireland: Report of the Trustees of the Indian Relief Fund...* (Dublin: J. Browne, 1847); Gray, *Famine, Land and Politics*, 257.
- 59 Correspondence Relating to Measures for Relief of Distress in Ireland, July 1846 - January 1847, British Parliamentary Papers 1847, vol. 51 [761]. On Baring's earlier involvement see: Kinealy, *Charity and the Great Hunger in Ireland*, 22-23
- 60 Murphy (ed.) *Annals of the Famine in Ireland*, n.34, 208.
- 61 Kinealy, *Charity and the Great Hunger in Ireland*, 3 63-83; Murphy, ed., *Annals of the Famine in Ireland*, 46-7, 207 (n. 30).
- 62 Gray, *Famine, Land and Politics*, 257-258; Kinealy, *Charity and the Great Hunger in Ireland*, 195-208, 219-220.
- 63 *Ibid.*, 192.
- 64 British Association Minute Book, National Library of Dublin, MS2022. For analysis of the donations see: Kinealy, *Charity and the Great Hunger in Ireland*, ch.9.
- 65 *Ibid.*, 185-189.
- 66 *Cambridge Independent Press*, 18 October 1845, 4.
- 67 *Wiltshire Independent*, 23 October 1845, 6.
- 68 *Loc. cit.*
- 69 *Ipswich Journal*, 25 October 1845, 2.
- 70 *Hampshire Advertiser*, 1 November 1845, 4.
- 71 *Loc. cit.*
- 72 *Morning Post*, 30 October 1845, 2.
- 73 *Taunton Courier, and Western Advertiser*, 24 December 1845, 6-7.
- 74 *Leeds Times*, 27 December 1845, 6.
- 75 *Sheffield Independent*, 6 December 1845, 8.
- 76 *Bradford Observer*, 4 December 1845, 4-5; *Morning Post*, 10 December 1845, 5-6.
- 77 *Western Times*, 8 November 1845, 2-3. On the Anti-Corn Law League's campaigning, see Pickering and Tyrrell, *The People's Bread*, esp. chapters 2 and 8.
- 78 As Charles Withers notes, though, policy responses and migratory consequences between the famines in Ireland and Scotland were similar: "[Destitution and Migration: Labour Mobility and Relief from Famine in Highland Scotland 1836-1850](#)," *Journal of Historical Geography* 14, no. 2 (1988): 128-150.
- 79 This fractious, complex relationship was perhaps best typified by the fact that in the ACCL's hometown of Manchester it hired "'Irish thugs'" to protect the League Platform and disrupt Chartist platforms: Janette Martin, "'Popular Political Oratory and Itinerant Lecturing in Yorkshire and the North East in the Age of Chartism, c 1837-1860'" (unpublished PhD thesis, University of York, United Kingdom, 2010), 57.
- 80 The outstanding recent study of Chartism is Malcolm Chase's *Chartism: A New History* (Manchester, United Kingdom: Manchester University Press, 2007). For an analysis of the work of Irish Chartists in England, see Roger Swift, "[Thomas Carlyle, Chartism, and The Irish in Early Victorian England](#)," *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 29, no. 1 (2001): 67-83.

- 81 *Northern Star*, 30 August 1845, 15; *Northern Star*, 1 November 1845, esp. 21.
- 82 *Northern Star*, 15 November 1845, 12.
- 83 *Northern Star*, 10 January, 4; *Northern Star*, 24 January 1846, 1.
- 84 Chase, *Chartism*, 271. The idea that there was insufficient land in Ireland to support the level of population in the mid 1840s has been absolutely refuted; see Louis Cullen, "[Irish History Without the Potato](#)," *Past & Present* 40 (1968): 72-83.
- 85 *Northern Star*, 14 February 1846, 5.
- 86 Shipkey, *Peel's Irish Policy*, 321.
- 87 *Salisbury and Winchester Journal*, 4 October 1845, 2.
- 88 *Salisbury and Winchester Journal*, 25 October 1845, 2.
- 89 *Fife Herald*, 28 October 1845, 2-3.
- 90 *Leeds Times*, 8 November 1845, 4.
- 91 Loc. cit.
- 92 *Cambridge Independent Press*, 29 November 1845, 8.
- 93 Peter J. Gurney, "['Rejoicing in Potatoes': The Politics of Consumption in England during the 'Hungry Forties'](#)," *Past & Present*, 203, no. 1 (2009): 99-136, 131.
- 94 *Hampshire Advertiser*, 1 November 1845, 4.
- 95 *Hereford Journal*, 26 November 1845, 3.
- 96 On the geography of Irish migrant settlement in Britain see: Donald MacRaild, *The Irish Diaspora in Britain, 1750-1939* (Basingstoke, United Kingdom: Palgrave, 2011), ch. 2.
- 97 Kinealy, *A Death-Dealing Famine*, 63.
- 98 *Hansard*, House of Commons Debate, 8 June 1846, vol. 87 cc. 129-94.
- 99 *Hansard*, House of Commons Debate, 24 April 1846, vol. 85 cc. 980-1022. For further reporting not detailed in *Hansard*, see *Bradford Observer*, 23 April 1846, 3-4. An exception to this rhetoric was George Bankes, Tory landowner and MP for the "family seat" at Wareham in Dorset. During the debate in the Commons on 8 May 1846 on the Corn Importation Bill, Bankes, an ardent supporter of the Corn Laws, stated that the "distress" in Ireland ought be supported by "public subscriptions and grants from the Exchequer" as opposed to "aggravated by the sacrifice of one of the great interest of the country": *Hansard*, House of Commons Debate, 8 May 1846, vol. 86 cc. 226-99. The direct quotation comes from the Parliamentary report in *Liverpool Mercury*, 15 May 1846, 2.
- 100 *Bristol Mercury*, 25 April 1846, 5.
- 101 Loc. cit.
- 102 Loc. cit.
- 103 *Morning Post*, 10 April 1846, 3.
- 104 Loc. cit.
- 105 *Morning Post*, 10 April 1846, 3; Indian Relief Fund, *Distress in Ireland*. Also see: Gray, *Famine, Land and Politics*, 257.
- 106 Kinealy, *Charity and the Great Hunger in Ireland*, 42-4. A subscription was also raised amongst the "European and Native" residents of Kandy, Ceylon/Sri Lanka: *Freeman's Journal*, 2 June 1846, 2.
- 107 *Standard*, 3 September 1846, 2.
- 108 *Standard*, 15 September 1846, 2.
- 109 *Morning Post*, 5 October 1846, 7.
- 110 *Morning Post*, 12 October 1846, 1.
- 111 *Standard*, 17 October 1846, 2.

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- 112 *Standard*, 13 November 1846, 1-2.
- 113 *Freeman's Journal*, 20 November 1846, 4. The surviving administrative records of the National Club are held at the Bodleian Library, Oxford: Dep. b. 235-40, c. 682-4, d. 754-7.
- 114 For instance see reports of schemes in: *Hull Packet*, 23 October 1846, 8; *Hull Packet*, 25 December 1846, 5; *York Herald*, 24 October 1846, 7; *Standard*, 28 December 1846, 4 (regarding a meeting at Liverpool to raise a general subscription); *Leeds Mercury*, 2 January 1847, 4.
- 115 *Leeds Mercury*, 19 December 1846, 5.
- 116 On the popular experience of the "Hungry 40s" in England see: Gurney, "Rejoicing in potatoes."
- 117 The best articulation of these geographies of working cosmopolitanism appears in the ongoing work of David Featherstone. For his most detailed exposition, see *Solidarity: Hidden Histories and Geographies of Internationalism* (London: Zed Books, 2012), esp. ch.3.
- 118 MacRaild, *The Irish Diaspora*, pp.163-7; Louise Miskell, "Reassessing the Anti-Irish Riot: Popular Protest and the Irish in South Wales, c. 1826-1882," in Paul O'Leary, ed., *Irish Migrants in Modern Wales* (Liverpool, United Kingdom: Liverpool University Press, 2004), 101-118. On the culture of working xenophobia in rural England see: Keith D.M. Snell, "[The Culture of Local Xenophobia](#)," *Social History* 28, no. 1 (2003): 1-30.
- 119 Gray, *Famine, Land and Politics*; Nally, *Human Encumbrances*, esp. chs 4 and 6.
- 120 One possibility is the systematic analysis of the Dublin-based Relief Commission's surviving papers held at the National Archives of Ireland, but given that the Commission was formally stood down in August 1846 and not re-constituted until February 1847, this source does not offer a systematic survey.
- 121 On the idea of compassion fatigue and ingratitude, see Paul Bew, *Ireland: The Politics of Enmity 1789-2006* (Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2007), 210; Kinealy, *A Death-Dealing Famine*, 13, 118; Kearns and Laxton, "Ethnic Groups as Public Health Hazards," 31. The phrase "monstrous ingratitude" was first used in a report in the *Times*, 22 September 1847, 4.
- 122 The outstanding recent contributions are Nally, *Human Encumbrances*; and Crowley, Smyth and Murphy, *Atlas of the Great Irish Famine*.