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Middle-class Catholic responses to Ireland's Great Famine

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‘There But For The Grace of God Go I’: Middle-Class Catholic Responses to Ireland’s Great Famine*

No place in Ireland was more synonymous with the horrific suffering of the Famine years than the town of Skibbereen in west Cork.¹ In the early 1870s, Canon John O’Rourke, the parish priest of Maynooth, County Kildare, who wrote the first major history of Ireland’s Great Famine, visited Skibbereen, and made the short journey to the outskirts of the town to pay his respects at the graveyard at Abbeystrowry, believed to be the final resting place of at least 8,000 people. ‘The spot in which a generation of the people of Skibbereen was buried in a year and a-half!’ was how he described this solemn place.² As he approached the ‘pits’, as the mass graves were called, he contemplated the method of interment of the Famine dead, most of whom did not receive the proper funeral rites. His unease was derived from the knowledge that the dead were buried without coffins, which was unknown even in workhouses in the east of Ireland. ‘A little sawdust was sprinkled over each corpse, on being laid in the pit’, O’Rourke was later told on inquiring with locals, ‘which was thus kept open until it had received its full complement of tenants’.³ Walking around the pits, he reflected on the plight of the Catholic poor, who had died in such vast numbers:

* I am grateful to Ewen A. Cameron and Vincent Comerford for comments on earlier drafts. The constructive and helpful comments of the two anonymous readers for the *English Historical Review* helped me to clarify important arguments and reformulate a number of key interpretations.

¹ On the place of Skibbereen in the diasporic memory of the Great Irish Famine, see K.A. Miller, “‘Revenge for Skibbereen’: Irish Emigration and the Meaning of the Great Famine”, in A. Gribben, ed., *The Great Famine and Irish Diaspora in America* (Amherst, MA, 1999), pp. 180–95.

² John O’Rourke, *The History of the Great Irish Famine of 1847, with Notices of Earlier Irish Famines* (3rd edn, Dublin, 1902), p. 278.

³ *Ibid.*

Although thus cast down by earthly feelings, divine Faith raises one up again. Divine Faith! The noblest and brightest, and holiest gift of God to man; always teaching us to look heavenward—Excelsior in its theme for ever. And who can doubt but the God of all consolation and mercy received the souls of his famine-slain poor into that kingdom of glory where He dwells, and which He had purchased for them at so great a price. Even in their imperfections and sins, they were like to Him in many ways: they were poor, they were despised; they had not whereon to lay their head; they were long-suffering, too: in the deepest pangs they suffered from hunger and burning thirst (the last and most terrible effect of hunger), they cursed not, they reviled not; they only yearned for the consolations of their holy religion, and looked hopefully to Him for a better world. It is one of the sweetest consolations taught us by holy Faith that the bones now withered and nameless in those famine pits, where they were laid in their shroudless misery, shall one day, touched by His Almighty power, be reunited to those happy souls, in a union that can know no end, and can feel no sorrow.⁴

While orthodox in terms of Catholic theology, this meditation on the afterlives of the famine dead is revealing in many respects.⁵ That, through death, they were raised to a more perfect state of grace is conventional Catholic belief, as is the view that the deep poverty that marked their existence on earth would ensure eternal salvation. Notions of holy poverty infuse O'Rourke's thinking. Yet the assumption of passivity in the face of the death is equally telling. The suggestion that the dying 'cursed not' and 'reviled not' is also a common one:

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 279. This paragraph is also reproduced by R.V. Comerford, 'Canon John O'Rourke, Historian of the Great Famine', in T. Kabdebo, ed., *Beyond the Library Walls* (Maynooth, 1995), p. 67.

⁵ See R.V. Comerford, 'Grievance, Scourge or Shame? The Complexity of Attitudes to Ireland's Great Famine', in C. Noack, L. Janssen and R.V. Comerford, eds., *Holodomor and Gorta Mór: Histories, Memories and Representations of Famine in Ukraine and Ireland* (London, 2012), pp. 52–4.

weary resignation was the prelude to the final phase of life. A liberal French Catholic, Édouard Dechy, who visited Ireland in the winter of 1846/7 also saw nobility in the ‘heroic’ deaths of the Irish poor: ‘What a picture of pious sublimity it is to see a whole people on its knees for the last at the feet of Christ, dying of starvation while demanding bread from God’.⁶ It was widely perceived that resignation, rather than resistance, was the response of Irish Catholics to hunger and starvation. A generation later, the nationalist leader Michael Davitt was to condemn the passivity of the poor in response to the brutal actions of landlords and the government during the Famine.⁷ As we know now, Davitt’s characterisation is far less accurate for the early years of the Famine: collective action to hold down food prices and restore the moral economy was much in evidence during the first two years of the crisis.⁸

O’Rourke’s account of his visit to Abbeystowry is a rare glimpse into the experiences of the Catholic poor during the Famine years. His narrative is largely based on published sources, especially the Blue Books of parliamentary papers which represent such a treasure trove for historians of the Great Famine, parliamentary debates, and newspapers, especially the voice of the respectable Irish Catholic middle class, the *Freeman’s Journal*.⁹ He was certainly neither the first nor the last writer to make the argument for British negligence, culpability and sheer indifference, on the basis of documentary evidence

⁶ Édouard Dechy, ‘A Journey to Ireland in 1846 and 1847’ (1847), in M. Hurst, ed., *Ireland Through Continental Eyes* (Bristol, 2000), p. 236. Originally published as *Voyage: Irlande en 1846 et 1847* (Paris, 1847).

⁷ Michael Davitt, *The Fall of Feudalism, or the Story of the Land League Revolution* (London, 1904), pp. 47–8.

⁸ J. Cunningham, ‘“Tis Hard to Argue Starvation into Quiet”: Protest and Resistance, 1846–47’, in E. Delaney and B. Mac Suibhne, eds., *Ireland’s Great Famine and Popular Politics* (New York, 2016), pp. 10–33; A. Eiríksson, ‘Food Supply and Food Riots’, in C. Ó Gráda, ed., *Famine 150* (Dublin, 1997), pp. 67–94.

⁹ The *Freeman’s Journal*, under the ownership and editorship of Sir John Gray from 1841 onwards, became increasingly nationalist in tone and a strong supporter of Daniel O’Connell’s campaign for the repeal of the union. See C.J. Woods, ‘Gray, Sir John’, in J. McGuire and J. Quinn, eds., *Dictionary of Irish Biography* (11 vols, Cambridge, 2009–18) [hereafter *DIB*].

produced by the organs of the government that had itself overseen the relief efforts during the crisis. The even more famous account of Irish republican propagandist John Mitchel was based largely on documents available in the public domain.¹⁰ O'Rourke even paid gracious notice to the self-serving account produced by the assistant secretary to the Treasury, Charles Trevelehan, who had overall responsibility for famine relief efforts, noting that 'although far from agreeing with many of Sir Charles's conclusions ... still the Author cheerfully acknowledges, that the statistical information in the Irish Crisis is very valuable to a student of the history of the Famine period'.¹¹ O'Rourke distributed questionnaires 'to such persons as were supposed to be in possession of information on the subject', presumably fellow priests, though he incorporated very few of these first-hand accounts of the catastrophe.¹² Why that was the case is anybody's guess, although a more conspiratorial reading might suggest that the information he derived was not deemed suitable for public consumption, especially if it indicated that communal solidarity among Irish Catholics, so crucial in the context of the emerging home rule politics of the 1870s, collapsed during the Famine years. These unwelcome questionnaires were likely to have reminded the recipients of the dark days of the late 1840s, and drawn attention to the painful memories of what people did and did not do.

The construction of a national Catholic Irish identity from the 1870s onwards demanded that the Great Famine be seen as a 'national' disaster, rather than a 'class' one. As the writer Colm Tóibín remarked over two decades ago, the overall imperative in post-Famine Ireland was to create the appearance of Catholic Irish unity at all costs: 'The Famine,

¹⁰ John Mitchel, *The Last Conquest of Ireland (Perhaps)* (1873; author's edn, Glasgow, 1876), pp. 210–20.

¹¹ O'Rourke, *History of the Great Irish Famine of 1847*, pp. viii–ix. On the background to this important account, see Comerford, 'Canon John O'Rourke', pp. 58–68.

¹² O'Rourke, *History of the Great Irish Famine of 1847*, p. vii. The fate of these questionnaires is unknown.

then had to be blamed on the Great Other, the enemy across the water, and the victims of the Famine had to be this entire Irish nation, rather than a vulnerable section of the population'.¹³ This reflects a wider trend in Irish historical writing which privileges politics over social class, and where issues of class are, in Cormac Ó Gráda's words, 'too long taboo in Irish historiography'.¹⁴ The construction of this public narrative, centred around the universal and totalising destruction wreaked by the Famine across all of Irish society, was an early precursor of a broader myth in Irish self-identity: the absence of class distinctions. A sociologist investigating social class in independent Ireland in the late 1960s noted, with a degree of incredulity, that 'a belief in a classless society is widely and sincerely held'.¹⁵

The actions or inactions of the Catholic middle class challenge such a narrative. Ó Gráda has drawn attention to their role 'in preventing or exacerbating mortality'.¹⁶ Beyond isolated scraps of information, contained in official documentation or travellers' accounts, the reaction of the Catholic middle classes to Ireland's Great Famine is virtually unknown. There are many 'silences' about what transpired in the late 1840s, some more grounded in reality than others, yet the lack of attention paid to this subject is quite remarkable.¹⁷

In other contexts, the middle classes have generated much source material for historians to use to piece together their attitudes and sensibilities towards the poor, the construction of their civic identity and worldviews.¹⁸ For the Irish Catholic middle class,

¹³ C. Tóibín and D. Ferriter, *The Irish Famine: A Documentary* (London, 2001), p. 7. Tóibín's article was first published as 'Erasures', *London Review of Books*, xx (1998), pp. 17–23.

¹⁴ C. Ó Gráda, *Ireland: A New Economic History* (Oxford, 1994), p. 202.

¹⁵ B. Hutchinson, *Social Status and Inter-Generational Social Mobility in Dublin* (Dublin, 1969), p. 11.

¹⁶ Ó Gráda, *Ireland*, p. 202.

¹⁷ See N. Ó Ciosáin, 'Was There 'Silence' about the Famine?', *Irish Studies Review*, iv (1995), pp. 7–10.

¹⁸ See, for example, in the British context, see L. Davidoff and C. Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780–1850* (London, 1992); A.J. Kidd and D. Nicholls, eds., *Gender, Civic Culture, and Consumerism: Middle-Class Identity in Britain, 1800–1940* (Manchester, 1999).

particularly in rural Ireland, the main body of materials for the mid-nineteenth century relates to their political voice in O'Connellite politics rather than social relationships. Much of the scholarly work on the history of Ireland's Great Famine has concentrated on the responses of the government, along with the key institutions of the time: constitutional nationalism, the Catholic Church, and the other religious denominations. This article pursues a different line of inquiry: how the Catholic middle classes reacted to the unfolding events in Ireland in the mid- to late 1840s. In a rare discussion of class-based sensibilities, David Fitzpatrick has commented on the reactions of those who could potentially lose status as a result of the crisis, and the social tensions that these anxieties fuelled:

While the impoverished demanded equalization of burden, their former superiors struggled to maintain the economic expressions of that superiority. It is scarcely surprising that the levelling effects of the Famine provoked innumerable ugly responses from those with status to be lost, ranging from the evicting landlord to the profiteering merchant, from the farmer firing his workers to the relief committee-man making off with the thickest soup.¹⁹

The principal aim of this article is to contribute to the emerging body of work that challenges the dominant understanding of Ireland's Great Famine as a universal experience, and moreover seeks to identify and understand conflict both between and within social classes in those hungry years.²⁰

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¹⁹ D. Fitzpatrick, 'Famine, Entitlements and Seduction: Captain Edmond Wynne in Ireland, 1846–1851', *English Historical Review*, cx (1995), p. 597.

²⁰ See B. Mac Suibhne, *Subjects Lacking Words? The Gray Zone of the Great Famine* (Hamden, CT, 2017); M. Corporaal and P. Gray, eds., *The Great Irish Famine and Social Class: Conflicts, Responsibilities, Representations* (Oxford, 2019).

During the Penal Era, when legal restrictions prohibited Catholics from purchasing land and, among other things, holding political office, middle-class Catholics were heavily involved in trade and commerce, as one of the few avenues open to them. By the end of the eighteenth century, as Maureen Wall illustrated more than fifty years ago, trade was the principal source of the rising Catholic middle-class prosperity.²¹ On the eve of the Great Famine, the growing political, as well as economic, power of the Catholic middle classes was evident to outsiders. Based largely on their secure economic footing in agriculture—either as head tenants or strong farmers—and trade within towns or cities, the Catholic middle classes sought to gain control from the Anglican elite, who had until then dominated the economic and political system. Numerically not very significant, their importance was essentially based on growing prosperity and political aspirations. The perceptive French observer, Gustave de Beaumont, who visited the country in the mid-1830s, saw the future development of democracy in Ireland and the prevention of despotic government as resting primarily on the consolidation of the political power of the aspiring Catholic middle classes:

Take away the middle class from Ireland, and you will at once have a country, the best possibly prepared for the reception of an absolute government. Every tyranny would be easy, and, I might almost, say, agreeable to the people, provided it declared and waged war against the aristocracy. From this, indeed, democracy might result, but of the kind which despotism produces. There is in Ireland one chance for absolute power, which the rising middle class may dispute with it, and

²¹ M. Wall, 'The Rise of a Catholic Middle Class in Eighteenth-Century Ireland', *Irish Historical Studies*, xi (1958), pp. 91–115; for a very perceptive analysis, see L.M. Cullen, 'Catholic Social Classes Under the Penal Laws', in T.P. Power and K. Whelan, eds., *Endurance and Emergence: Catholics in Ireland in the Eighteenth Century* (Dublin, 1990), pp. 57–84.

on the success or failure of this class depends the question, whether Ireland shall have the equality of despotism, or of a free democracy.²²

Who exactly were the Catholic middle class in Famine Ireland?²³ Only from 1861 onwards, when denomination was first enumerated in the Irish census, is it possible to detail with precision the relationship between social class and religion.²⁴ As with all broad groupings, there was a huge diversity in status, income and outlook. Typically, outside of the professionals in urban areas such as doctors and solicitors, it included the petty trader or shopkeeper, who, along with the parish priest, the local schoolmaster and the substantial tenant farmers, made up the rural Catholic middle class. As Kevin Whelan argued on the basis of his detailed study of County Wexford, ‘the leading groups are publicans, priests, grocers, and merchants: groups who, with the addition of the strong farmer, were the backbone of nineteenth-century Catholicism’.²⁵ Strong farmers usually held at least 80–100 acres of land, typically on a long lease, though there were significant regional variations.²⁶ He identifies a pyramidal structure in the eighteenth century, consisting of a tiny gentry elite, followed by middlemen and merchants, and a much larger group of tenant farmers.²⁷ Politically, they were mainly O’Connellite, seeing reform of the governance of Ireland as closely allied to their own material and confessional interests. This group differed substantially in status and outlook from the upper-middle-class Catholic elite, who educated

²² Gustave de Beaumont, *Ireland: Social, Political and Religious*, ed. W.C. Taylor (1839; new edn, Cambridge, MA, 2006), p. 251.

²³ A model local study of one Catholic middle-class family is P. O’Brien, *The Glynnys of Kilrush, County Clare, 1811–1940: Family, Business and Politics* (Dublin, 2019).

²⁴ W.E. Vaughan and A.J. Fitzpatrick, eds., *Irish Historical Statistics: Population, 1821–1971* (Dublin, 1978), p. xiii.

²⁵ K. Whelan, ‘The Catholic Community in Eighteenth-Century County Wexford’, in Power and Whelan, eds., *Endurance and Emergence*, p. 152.

²⁶ See K.T. Hoppen, *Ireland Since 1800: Conflict and Conformity* (Harlow, 1988), p. 38.

²⁷ Whelan, ‘The Catholic Community in Eighteenth-Century County Wexford’, p. 130.

their children in Catholic schools such as Clongowes Wood College, or at English public schools, and whose outlook and mentality has been recently excavated by Ciarán O’Neill.²⁸ The mixed political loyalties of this elite became increasingly significant in the 1870s and 1880s, as Irish nationalists sought to wrest power and control from the Protestant establishment.

Attendance at a Sunday service was as much a measure of social rank as of piety in rural Ireland before the Great Famine. D.W. Miller’s ingenious mapping of mass attendance in the early 1830s underscores the point that the regions in which the strong farming classes were numerically most significant (southern Leinster and eastern Munster) were the same areas where mass attendance was highest. ‘Respectability’, that key Victorian middle-class sensibility, was illustrated by the weekly pilgrimage in their finest clothes to the local chapel which (along with market-day), was the key routine in the lives of strong farmers, whose sense of self-worth was firmly associated with how they were perceived by others.²⁹ The subtle and finely-calibrated distinctions within Irish Catholicism were played out in where people sat in church.³⁰ Pews at the front of the church were often purchased by wealthy parishioners. Mary Fogarty, whose family were large farmers in County Limerick, for instance, ‘owned’ the first two pews at the local church at St Patrick’s Well, Lough Gur.³¹

²⁸ C. O’Neill, *Catholics of Consequence: Transnational Education, Social Mobility, and the Irish Catholic Elite, 1850–1900* (Oxford, 2015). For elite Catholics in the later period, see S. Pašeta, *Before the Revolution: Nationalism, Social Change and Ireland’s Catholic Elite, 1879–1922* (Cork, 1999); F. Campbell, *The Irish Establishment, 1879–1914* (Oxford, 2009) and L.W. McBride, *The Greening of Dublin Castle: The Transformation of Bureaucratic and Judicial Personnel in Ireland, 1892–1922* (Washington, DC, 1991).

²⁹ D.W. Miller, ‘Mass Attendance in Ireland in 1834’, in S.J. Brown and D.W. Miller, eds., *Piety and Power in Ireland, 1760–1960: Essays in Honour of Emmet Larkin* (Belfast, 2000), pp. 174–9.

³⁰ S.J. Connolly, *Priests and People in Pre-Famine Ireland, 1780–1845* (Dublin, 1982), pp. 30–31; C. Delay, ‘“The Gates Were Shut”: Catholics, Chapels, and Power in Late Nineteenth-Century Ireland’, *New Hibernia Review*, xiv (2010), pp. 24–9.

³¹ M. Carberry, *The Farm by Lough Gur: The Story of Mary Fogarty (Sissy O’Brien)* (new edn, Dublin, 1973), p. 25.

An Austrian Redemptorist priest who conducted missions in 1851 remembered that churches in Limerick city had clear social divisions:

The galleries and the spaces near the altar were reserved for those who paid an admission fee and paid voluntary donations. The rear was reserved for the very poor. As in England so it is also in Ireland, there is a separation between those who have something and nothing, since the latter are usually full of vermin. Moreover, the upkeep of the bishop, the priests and the church depend on the revenues from admission fees and voluntary offerings.³²

At the top end of the middle-class social scale, the gradual penetration of professional Catholics into the echelons of the political and legal establishment in the first half of the nineteenth century in the wake of emancipation was well-established.³³ Whether serving as stipendiary magistrates, appointed by Dublin Castle, or as O'Connellite MPs, the incorporation of upper-middle-class Catholics into the quasi-colonial system of governance was well under way before the late 1840s, even if it reached its apogee in the decades after the crisis. Other professions, such as medicine, also had a substantial proportion of adherents to the Church of Rome, though by the early 1860s Catholics still accounted for only a third of the medical and legal professions.³⁴ The reform of municipal and local government of the early 1840s opened up other opportunities in urban centres. Previously, in cities such as Dublin, Cork, Limerick and Galway, there was an asymmetry between the strong economic power of the rising Catholic middle classes and the limited political influence which they

³² *A Redemptorist Missionary in Ireland, 1851–1854: Memoirs by Joseph Prost, C.Sc.R.*, ed. E. Larkin and H. Freudenberger (Cork, 1998), pp. 32–3.

³³ See Connolly, *Priests and People*, pp. 24ff. for a valuable discussion of the social divisions within the Catholic laity. See also K. Whelan, 'The Catholic Church in County Tipperary', in W. Nolan, ed., *Tipperary: History and Society* (Dublin, 1985), pp. 244ff.

³⁴ Connolly, *Priests and People*, pp. 27–8.

exerted on these bodies.³⁵ Outside of the cities, one fine-grained study of Catholic middle-class political consciousness in County Longford during the 1830s and 1840s shows how the commercial elites sought successfully to prise control from the entrenched Protestant interest.³⁶

The extent to which this confessional grouping shared a common set of attitudes is difficult to pinpoint with any precision. For a significant number of merchants and dealers, the absence of barriers to trade within the United Kingdom was the core element of their ideological outlook, prospering as they did from the close integration of the Irish market within the wider British one. As Joseph Lee has pointed out, the profits from the expansion in export trade to Britain before 1845 ‘did not wind up in labourers’ pockets: they were siphoned off by traders and farmers’.³⁷ The growth in bank deposits before the Famine is hard evidence of the concentrated nature of this middle-class prosperity.³⁸ For strong farmers (and indeed landlords), it was perceived that the removal of protectionism after the repeal of the Corn Laws would adversely affect the export market to Britain on which strong farmers so heavily depended, by facilitating imports from the rest of the world.³⁹ As it happened, the doom-sayers were wrong. Irish agriculture continued to prosper in the second half of the nineteenth century, but the source of this prosperity was primarily in pastoral agriculture.

³⁵ D. Dickson, ‘Catholics and Trade in Eighteenth-Century Ireland: An Old Debate Revisited’, in Power and Whelan, eds., *Endurance and Emergence*, pp. 85–100; J.B. O’Brien, *The Catholic Middle Classes in Pre-Famine Cork* (Dublin, [1980]), pp. 9–11.

³⁶ F. O’Ferrall, ‘The Rise of the Catholic Middle Class: O’Connellites in County Longford, 1820–50’, in F. Lane, ed., *Politics, Society and the Middle Class in Modern Ireland* (Basingstoke, 2010), pp. 48–64.

³⁷ J. Lee, ‘The Dual Economy in Ireland, 1800–50’, in T.D. Williams, ed., *Historical Studies VIII* (Dublin, 1971), p. 197.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 194.

³⁹ R.D.C. Black, *Economic Thought and the Irish Question, 1817–1870* (Cambridge, 1960), pp. 143–4.

When it came to the sharp social divisions that characterised mid-nineteenth century Ireland, there was very little understanding or empathy with the plight of the poor.⁴⁰ Catholic attitudes towards poverty were by no means uniform, yet there was a strong distinction made between the ‘deserving’ and the ‘undeserving’ poor, as was the case across western Europe. This distinction was rendered irrelevant in the face of widespread hunger, as vast numbers of people suddenly, and unexpectedly, became categorised as ‘deserving’.⁴¹ William Murphy, the advisor to O’Connell on financial matters and dubbed the ‘richest Catholic in Ireland’, met Alexis de Tocqueville in July 1835 and discussed with the French writer the situation of the poor, an issue which almost every foreign visitor to Ireland before the Famine commented upon. In Murphy’s view, a programme of large-scale resettlement across the country on uncultivated lands was a solution, not recognising the irony of the parallel to a Cromwellian-type forced displacement. When Tocqueville pressed him further on whether the ‘poor population of Ireland can be easily displaced and driven at will to the selected places’, Murphy’s response was emphatic: ‘the place of birth for such wretched creatures has not any value’.⁴² Such a view flies in the face of numerous heart-breaking accounts of families clinging to small-holdings, risking life and limb, once the evictions got going with merciless efficiency from 1848 onwards, in the wake of the mass clearances initiated by the Gregory Clause of the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1847. Under this clause, any person (and their

⁴⁰ On the poor in pre-Famine Ireland, see the excellent series of articles by T.P. O’Neill: ‘The Catholic Church and Relief of the Poor, 1815–45’, *Archivium Hibernicum*, xxxi (1973), pp. 132–45; ‘Poverty in Ireland, 1815–45’, *Folklife*, xi (1973), 22–33; ‘Clare and Irish Poverty, 1815–1851’, *Studia Hibernica*, xiv (1974), pp. 7–27; ‘Fever and Public Health in Pre-Famine Ireland’, *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*, ciii (1973), pp. 1–34. The best recent account can be found in N. Ó Ciosáin, *Ireland in Official Print Culture, 1800–1850: A New Reading of the Poor Inquiry* (Oxford, 2014), chs. 4–6.

⁴¹ N. Ó Ciosáin, ‘Bocoughs and God’s Poor: Deserving and Undeserving Poor in Irish Popular Culture’, in T. Foley and S. Ryder, ed., *Ideology and Ireland in the Nineteenth Century* (Dublin, 1998), pp. 93–99.

⁴² *Alexis de Tocqueville’s Journey in Ireland, July–August 1835*, ed. E. Larkin (Dublin, 1990), p. 23.

dependents) occupying more than one quarter of an acre of land was not eligible for poor relief; it was used by landlords to clear estates of their unproductive tenants. Interestingly, over eighty years later, when a similar scheme was initiated by the Irish Land Commission, it proved quite an attractive option to those with poor land in the west of Ireland who were given holdings in the prosperous eastern region of County Meath.⁴³ Stereotypes of the ‘improvident’ Catholic poor which loomed so large in British understanding of the Irish national ‘character’ were shared by Murphy, who lamented that ‘the more intolerable their poverty becomes, the more the spirit of improvidence seems to increase’.⁴⁴ Such views, more usually associated with the Protestant landed elite, were to have lethal consequences a decade later. But as Virginia Crossman has argued in the context of post-Famine Ireland, attitudes towards poverty were less marked by confessional differences than by those of social class:

Poverty was assumed to be a natural and permanent element of society, and while religious teaching promoted charity, indiscriminate charity was discouraged as doing more harm than good by encouraging idleness and dependency. The poor were regarded with pity but also with suspicion. The conditions in which they lived exposed them to disease and immorality and as such they represented a potential threat to the health of society.⁴⁵

The folklorist Caoimhín Ó Danachair observed that, over the course of the nineteenth century, the rising Catholic middle class adopted the values and norms of their Protestant neighbours, and its codes of conduct ‘became a curious and frequently disharmonic grafting

⁴³ See W. Nolan, ‘New Fields and Farms: Migration Policies of State Land Agencies, 1897–1980’, in W.J. Smyth and K. Whelan, eds., *Common Ground: Essays on the Historical Geography of Ireland* (Cork, 1988), pp. 296–319.

⁴⁴ *Alexis de Tocqueville’s Journey in Ireland*, pp. 22–3; on Murphy, see C.J. Woods, ‘Murphy, William’, in *DIB*.

⁴⁵ V. Crossman, ‘Middle-Class Attitudes Towards to Poverty and Welfare in Post-Famine Ireland’, in Lane, ed., *Politics, Society and the Middle Class in Modern Ireland*, pp. 131–2.

of puritan attitudes upon Catholic belief and practice'.⁴⁶ Ó Danachair quoted in support of his argument a well-known passage from Sir William Wilde's *Irish Popular Superstitions* (1852), in which Wilde reported that a correspondent had told him that Catholics were becoming more 'Protestant' in their religious practices and outlooks. Holy wells were suppressed, popular religious practices were centred around the church, and even the Catholic priests were apparently 'becoming more Protestant in their conversation and manners'.⁴⁷ Eugene Hynes points out, plausibly, that this was not simply a process of imitating the Protestant neighbours, but rather reflected the market orientation, values and material aspirations of the strong farming classes before the Famine.⁴⁸ These class sensibilities were most evident when it came to the operation of the market economy. They, like most members of their class and disposition, shared the widespread 'faith in the "market"', a belief that the self-regulating market functioned at all times in a natural and benevolent manner whenever permitted the liberty so to do, [which] became a kind of secular religion'.⁴⁹ When it came to the operation of the free market in a time of crisis, the Irish Catholic middle classes were devoted disciples of Adam Smith, who argued that in times of dearth the most effective response was not to interfere with the functioning of the market. The 'violence of government' in interfering with the market in a time of shortfall was, according to Smith, one of contributory factors in creating European famines.⁵⁰ This commitment to the perfect equilibrium of the market was to be tested during the Famine years.

⁴⁶ C. Ó Danachair, 'The Death of a Tradition', *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*, lxiii (1974), p. 222.

⁴⁷ William R. Wilde, *Irish Popular Superstitions* (Dublin, 1852), p. 17.

⁴⁸ E. Hynes, 'The Great Hunger and Irish Catholicism', *Societas*, viii (1978), p. 141.

⁴⁹ A. Randall, A. Charlesworth, R. Sheldon and D. Walsh, 'Markets, Market Culture and Popular Protest in Eighteenth-Century Britain and Ireland', in A. Randall and A. Charlesworth, eds., *Markets, Market Culture and Popular Protest in Eighteenth-Century Britain and Ireland* (Liverpool, 2011), p. 1.

⁵⁰ Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (London, 1776), cited in C. Ó Gráda, 'Markets and Famines in Pre-Industrial Europe', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, xxxvi (2005), p. 144. More recent important statements on the role

II

Initially such principles were set aside, as there were other, more immediate, concerns. The Famine created, through the search for food and other forms of relief, a staggering amount of movement on roads across the country.⁵¹ And movement of the poor always created dread of the one thing that the middle classes feared most, regardless of the precise calibration of social standing: disorder. Disorder in the Irish context was effectively what was described as the rule of the ‘mob’, collective action by the lower orders. The Catholic middle class had as much to fear from the poor taking matters into their own hands as did government officials and the landed elite. This is neatly encapsulated by an incident that occurred in August 1846. A Board of Works official reported that in Partry, near Ballinrobe, County Mayo, a Catholic curate, the Rev. Martin Conway, horsewhipped a number of men who arrived at his church to urge the locals not to work for low wages or pay rent. Conway told the faithful ‘not to be led astray by any unlawful behaviour, and to pay their rents if they were able’.⁵² The provision of military escorts for convoys of crops coming in from the countryside to towns illustrates this convergence of interests. In the prosperous agricultural districts, especially in the south and south-west, it was the strong farmers who demanded that local magistrates arrange armed

of markets during famines include A. Sen, *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation* (Oxford, 1981) and M. Ravaillion, *Markets and Famines* (Oxford, 1987). An excellent discussion on market failure during another Great Famine, that of fourteenth-century England, has informed my thinking: P. Slavin, ‘Market Failure During the Great Famine in England and Wales (1315–1317)’, *Past & Present*, no. 222 (2014), pp. 9–49.

⁵¹ P. Lysaght, ‘Women and the Great Famine: Vignettes from the Irish Oral Tradition’, in Gribben, ed., *The Great Famine and the Irish Diaspora in America*, pp. 33–4; W.J. Lowe, ‘Policing Famine Ireland’, *Éire-Ireland*, xxix (1994), pp. 51–2.

⁵² *Correspondence, from July 1846 to January 1847, Relating to the Measures Adopted for the Relief of the Distress in Ireland (Board of Works series)*, British Parliamentary Papers, [hereafter BPP], 1847 [764], vol. 1, p. 92, Molloy to Gordon, 31 Aug. 1846.

escorts for conveys of food making their way to ports for export.⁵³ Throughout the Famine years, the Irish Constabulary struggled to deal with the specific issues created by the crisis, on top of the demands of ‘ordinary’ policing.⁵⁴

Reporting to Charles Trevelyan in April 1846, a Commissariat official based at Banagher, County Offaly, described the effect of the scheme to distribute food for sale at low prices through a network of local depots. The basic objective was to enable people ‘to live by keeping down the price of provisions’, but there was another intended consequence. Small-time dealers or hucksters were forced to bring food to the market, fearing that the government depots would push prices down. Captain Pole reckoned that ‘a feeling of jealous anger arose at first here among the small dealers against [the] Government’, but this had now subsided. These dealers were ‘men who, living as wretchedly to all appearances as the rest of the community, nevertheless possess some money, and lay it out in meal or potatoes, and seeing or hearing of the probability of greater demand from increased distress, keep it up for a better price’.⁵⁵ A practice that speaks volumes about the petty distinctions prevalent in rural Ireland was that the small farmers experiencing ‘respectable distress’ were spared the embarrassment of queuing with the poor, and special arrangements were put in place as they are ‘naturally too proud to seek the meal where it is publicly disposed of’.⁵⁶ In Mayo, the Gallen and Costello Relief Committee optimistically petitioned the government in October 1846 to establish a depot in every parish within the barony, as the local merchants, with the exception of those in Westport, ‘have taken advantage of the poverty of the people, and have raised

⁵³ C. Ó Murchadha, *The Great Famine: Ireland’s Agony, 1845–1852* (London, 2011), p. 59.

⁵⁴ Lowe, ‘Policing Famine Ireland’.

⁵⁵ *Correspondence Explanatory of the Measures Adopted by Her Majesty’s Government for the Relief of Distress Arising from the Failure of the Potato Crop in Ireland*, BPP, 1846 [735], vol. xxxvii, p. 147, Pole to Trevelyan, [10] April 1846.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 212.

food even beyond famine prices'. Action was needed urgently to prevent starvation and the poor being left to 'the speculation of heartless, selfish merchants'.⁵⁷

Within this grouping, there was a wide disparity in the scale and scope of trading activities, from the small-time opportunistic dealer or huckster, who bought up food hoping to make a quick profit, to the established provisions dealers serving a local market. At the apex were the large merchant houses in Dublin, Cork and Limerick, the key link in the export nexus to Britain, and later for the massive importation of food from the United States in late 1846 and early 1847. Officials in London and across Ireland rightly saw the co-operation of these merchant houses as critical to the success of the overall relief effort. Yet reports of conversations with these merchants indicated that, while they were certainly well aware of the magnitude of the crisis, prominent figures were opposed to the distribution of 'gratuitous relief', not least because of the potential dampening effect on prices. Throughout 1846, reports came back to Charles Trevelyan that the merchant houses were also dissatisfied with the government acting in the market to distribute low-cost food, which was intended to hold down prices.⁵⁸ The appropriately named Edward Coffin, Commissary-General based at Limerick, reminded Trevelyan of this:

⁵⁷ *Correspondence, from July 1846 to January 1847, Relating to the Measures Adopted for the Relief of Distress in Ireland (Commissariat series)*, BPP, 1847 [761], vol. li, p. 247, Copy of Resolution passed at a Meeting of the Gallen and Costello Relief Committee, 13 Oct. 1846. Such rapacious merchants feature heavily in fictional literature of the Famine years, including John Hynes, the 'gombeenman' in Liam O'Flaherty's remarkable novel *Famine* (1937). Even more repulsive was the meal-monger Darby Skinadre in William Carleton's *Black Prophet* (1847). Skinadre, the 'very Genius of Famine', charged the poor usurious rates of interests on tiny purchases of meal.

⁵⁸ *Correspondence Explanatory of the Measures Adopted by Her Majesty's Government for the Relief of Distress Arising from the Failure of the Potato Crop in Ireland*, BPP, 1846 [735], vol. xxxvii, p. 217, Simmons to Trevelyan, 16 June 1846; *Correspondence, from July 1846 to January 1847, Relating to the Measures Adopted for the Relief of Distress in Ireland (Commissariat series)*, BPP, 1847 [761], vol. li, p.25, Haliday to Lords of the Treasury, 4 Aug. 1846.

I have had a great deal of unreserved conversation both with country gentlemen and with merchants and traders of all descriptions, and I do not perceive anything like indifference to the anticipated distress of the people, however much they dissent from each others [*sic*] views as to its probable extent, and the means by which it should be met. All concur in deprecating gratuitous relief of any kind, and in considering the provision of employment as the proper groundwork of any scheme of assistance...⁵⁹

The Dublin Chamber of Commerce inquired if the government intended to follow the same course of action in the following year, since this ‘may influence the operations of merchants engaged in, or who might engage in, the importation of foreign corn’.⁶⁰ It need not have worried. Trevelyan had no intention of repeating the wide-scale distribution and sale of food again in late 1847, leaving matters to ‘the foresight and enterprise of private merchants’.⁶¹

In some districts, merchants were remembered as having helped the local people by extending credit and dealing humanely with those who were unable to pay.⁶² Generally though, the reputations of local merchants, shopkeepers and dealers emerged badly from the hungry forties. Father Theobald Mathew, the famous temperance campaigner, reported to Trevelyan in December 1846 on how the supply chain of food ensured the accumulation of profit. He described scenes of the poor starving on the streets of Cork, as they could no longer afford to buy food. ‘I deeply regret the abandonment of the poor to corn and flour

⁵⁹ *Correspondence Explanatory of the Measures Adopted by Her Majesty’s Government for the Relief of Distress Arising from the Failure of the Potato Crop in Ireland*, BPP, 1846 [735], vol. xxxvii, p. 94, Coffin to Trevelyan, 17 Feb. 1846.

⁶⁰ *Correspondence, from July 1846 to January 1847, Relating to the Measures Adopted for the Relief of Distress in Ireland (Commissariat series)*, BPP, 1847 [761], vol. li, p. 25, Haliday to the Lords of the Treasury, 4 Aug. 1846.

⁶¹ Quoted in E. Delaney, *The Curse of Reason: The Great Irish Famine* (Dublin, 2012), p. 123.

⁶² See for example, University College Dublin, National Folklore Collection [hereafter NFC], MS 1072, p. 349, Susan Murphy Dromintee, Co Armagh, [b. 1848].

dealers', he told Trevelyan, adding that they 'charge from 50 to 100 per cent profit'. This speculation meant that cargoes of food were bought and sold like 'railway shares', ending up 'passing through different hands, before they are ground and sold to the poor'.⁶³ Elizabeth Smith (née Grant of Rothiemurchus), a Scottish landlord's wife and diarist, recounted how opportunistic traders in her locality of Baltiboy near Blessington, County Wicklow, were selling food at extortionate prices in March 1846:

The Managers who buy up flour and meal and sell it out in the very small quantities the labourers can only buy, nearly double the cost price on the poor purchaser, and if they give credit, charge usurious interest besides—a system that ruins hundreds—a system that every landlord and master is bound to check as far as in him lies.⁶⁴

The way the Smiths tried to obviate the worst excesses of this profiteering was to establish an informal provisions' store, selling meal and fuel at cost price. Similar schemes were adopted by other landlords, and this did what was it was intended to do: spare the poor from being at the mercy of unscrupulous traders.⁶⁵ Despite the traditional disapproval of Catholic priests about charging usurious rates of interests, it seems that small-time Catholic merchants and dealers had no such scruples.⁶⁶

The disparity between the widespread sense that dealers and merchants were exploiting the crisis and the historical evidence is revealing. Economic historians have

⁶³ *Correspondence, from July 1846 to January 1847, Relating to the Measures Adopted for the Relief of the Distress in Ireland (Board of Works series)*, BPP, 1847 [764], vol. li, p. 431, Mathew to Trevelyan, 16 Dec. 1846.

⁶⁴ Elizabeth Grant, *The Highland Lady in Ireland: Journals, 1840–50*, ed. P. Pelly and A. Tod (Edinburgh, 1991), pp. 215–16 (1 March 1846).

⁶⁵ See, for example, J. Murphy, *The Redingtons of Clarinbridge: Leading Catholic Landlords in the Nineteenth Century* ([Ennis], 1999), pp. 112–13.

⁶⁶ On this point for an earlier period, see D. Dickson, 'Catholics and Trade in Eighteenth-Century Ireland: An Old Debate Revisited', in Power and Whelan, eds., *Endurance and Emergence*, pp. 92–3.

demonstrated that, unlike other famines, Ireland's Great Famine was not a case of market failure—as happened, for instance, during the Great Bengal Famine of 1942/3 or the Great Famine in England and Wales of 1315–17. Other eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European famines, in France and Finland, demonstrate that the markets could continue to function effectively in famine situations, despite contemporary beliefs to the contrary.⁶⁷ After some initial price-spikes in potatoes and other foodstuffs in the first two years, the massive imports of American maize started to arrive in late 1847 driving prices down, and it is likely that importers lost out as a consequence. Cormac Ó Grada, for instance, has investigated the Dublin potato market, and while there is evidence of some price inflation and hoarding, this was not widespread.⁶⁸ If the market failed in Famine Ireland, we would see sustained evidence of a number of related developments: huge price variations, market segmentation, including significant price variations across geography (which did happen, but not to any great extent), and seasonality in terms of market supply, hoarding and speculation.⁶⁹ After reviewing the evidence, Ó Grada concluded that 'during the Irish Famine at least, markets worked more smoothly than might have been expected on the basis of a reading of qualitative and fictional accounts of markets and famines'.⁷⁰

Understandably, there was a confusion at the time between moral principles and economic realities. Market behaviour was not conditioned by a sense of moral purpose, but rather by the ability to turn a profit. Profiteering was restrained by the functioning of the

⁶⁷ Ó Gráda, 'Markets and Famines in Pre-Industrial Europe'; C. Ó Gráda, 'Markets and Famines: Evidence from Nineteenth-Century Finland', *Economic Development and Cultural Change*, xlix (2001), pp. 575–90.

⁶⁸ C. Ó Gráda, *Ireland's Great Famine: Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (Dublin, 2006), pp. 106–120. For prices in Irish agriculture more generally, see the excellent compendium of data with a commentary by Liam Kennedy and Peter Solar, *Irish Agriculture: A Price History from the Mid-Eighteenth Century to the Eve of the First World War* (Dublin, 2007).

⁶⁹ Slavin, 'Market Failure', p. 12.

⁷⁰ C. Ó Gráda, *Black '47 and Beyond: The Great Irish Famine* (Princeton, NJ, 1999), p. 149; see also Ó Gráda, *Ireland's Great Famine*, pp. 211–15.

market, rather than appeals to communal solidarity. The situation in more remote places, especially in the west of Ireland, is not as clear-cut, and meal-mongers and petty traders may well have made high profits, at least in the initial years. Another Irish Famine, that of 1799–1801, helps to illustrate the clash between ‘market and moral economies’.⁷¹ Unusual weather destroyed the potato harvest in consecutive years, leading to widespread dearth and suffering. There was a prevalent popular perception of profiteering by farmers, merchants and traders, accompanied by collective action and food riots to hold down prices across the country. The historical evidence again suggests a disparity between popular perceptions of great profiteering and the realities of the market. As with the later Famine, profits were made by farmers, merchants and millers, but traditional appeals to the moral economy, sometimes using violence and intimidation, ‘acted as a form of brake in intensifying unrestricted capitalism and accelerated capital formation in times of famine’.⁷²

Attacks on shops were not unusual, often driven by social protest as much as by the demand for food at reasonable prices, as shopkeepers, especially of bread shops, were the most immediate symbol of the inequalities that drove up prices in a time of food shortages.⁷³ Beneath the sphere of traders and shopkeepers there was another, less savoury, group who benefited from the regular balancing act of the poor to survive: pawnbrokers. As Ó Gráda has noted, pawnbroking was unevenly spread across the country, and heavily concentrated in the more commercialised eastern side of the country, especially Dublin.⁷⁴ Judging from the names cited in a parliamentary investigation in the late 1840s, most were Catholics, petty

⁷¹ R. Wells, ‘The Irish Famine of 1799–1801: Market Culture, Moral Economies and Social Protest’, in Randall and Charlesworth, eds., *Markets, Market Culture and Popular Protest*, pp. 163–93.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 192.

⁷³ See, for example, Ó Murchadha, *The Great Famine*, p. 58; D.G. Marnane, ‘The Famine in South Tipperary: Part 1’, *Tipperary Historical Journal*, n.v. (1996), pp. 11–12; B. MacDonald, ‘A Time of Desolation: Clones Poor Law Union, 1845–50’, *Clogher Record*, xvii (2000), p. 45.

⁷⁴ C. Ó Gráda, *Black '47*, p.150.

moneylenders whose existence allowed the poor to access ready cash in hard times; mainly items of clothing were pawned. A.M. Sullivan, the nationalist journalist and politician, recounted how, after the partial failure of the potato crop in late 1845, farmers sought out any means to buy seed for the following year's harvest and the 'the pawn-offices were choked with the humble finery that had shone at the village dance or christening feast'.⁷⁵ An English Quaker, Barclay Fox, touring the country in March 1847, described pawn shops refusing to make any further advances, and observed that 'a superior class of persons to his ordinary customers now resort to him for money'.⁷⁶ In December 1848, the Poor Law Commissioners received reports from Captain Edmond Wynne that the inmates of the workhouses were unable to leave because of a 'want of clothing', and this compels 'many to seek its shelter, who would be disposed to struggle against the want of food!'.⁷⁷ The commissioners were concerned, not least because they wanted to encourage people to leave the workhouses, and they initiated a remarkable survey of pawnbrokers across the country to investigate if this indeed was the case. What emerged from the investigation was that, after consecutive years of famine, few of the poor had any clothes deemed worthy of pledging, but also that the profile of those taking advantage of the services of the local pawnbroker was widening from the traditional users, the poor, to encompass small farmers, artisans and even shopkeepers. Apparently, 'a much better class of people than formerly' were taking advantage of the services offered by pawnbrokers, a reflection of increasing pauperisation as the effects of the famine wore on into the late 1840s.⁷⁸ From Parsonstown Union in County Offaly, one poor

⁷⁵ Alexander Martin Sullivan, *New Ireland* (7th edn, Glasgow, 1877), p. 59.

⁷⁶ Robert Barclay Fox, *Distress in Ireland: Narrative of R. Barclay Fox's Visit to Some Parts of the West of Ireland* (London, 1847), p. 2.

⁷⁷ *Papers Relating to Proceedings for the Relief of the Distress, and State of Unions and Workhouses, in Ireland (Eighth series)*, BPP, 1849 [1042], vol. xlvi, p. 341. Wynne has attracted much attention for his activities in Clare, but was at this time the temporary inspector for Carrick-on-Shannon and Boyle.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 354.

law officer reported that the ‘small farmers are every year getting worse, but the large farmers are still keeping up a respectable appearance’.⁷⁹ It was even reported that the lower-middle-class farmers were deterred from attending Sunday mass, as they did not have decent clothes to wear.⁸⁰

Pawnbrokers were part of a much wider system of credit in Famine Ireland. The most notorious and vilified figure was the ‘gombeen man’, a local trader who extended credit, usually at high rates of interest. A respondent to a folklore questionnaire from Stradbally, County Carlow, described how these people exploited the poor: ‘Poor people in the town [Stradbally] were forced to deal with the gombeen man to get food. The Gombeen man or woman ... was a person who could afford to buy oatmeal from farmers and then sell it to the poor at a great profit’.⁸¹ In an agricultural society, such lines of credit were a way of smoothing out the heavily seasonal nature of production and income, and the ‘gombeen man’ often managed to accumulate a tidy profit. William Bennett, another English Quaker, who toured the country in March–April 1847 promoting the planting of seed for other crops, described the oppressive nature of the system. Poor cottiers, landless labourers who had access to a plot of land known as a conacre for growing potatoes, borrowed money to pay for seed, and bought food on credit, only for the gombeen man to demand full payment with excessive rates of interest after the harvest, regardless of the state of the crop:

The poor cottier having taken his plot of ground on conacre,—that is, for the present crop, and no further interest in it,—requires seed, and having no money to purchase it, he goes to a Gombien [*sic*] man. This man sells him potatoes, or oats, or whatever else it may be, on the *credit of the harvest*, taking his I.O.U. at 50,

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 351.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 363.

⁸¹ Quoted in C. Quinlan, “‘A Punishment from God’”: The Famine in the Centenary Folklore Questionnaire’, *Irish Review*, xix (1996), p. 77.

70, and even 100 p. cent profit, according to circumstances, on the current market value of the article. Under any accident or failure, or even in fair seasons, he is often unable to pay this exorbitant price when the time comes around. The Gombien man enters his process for the recovery of the I.O.U., and generally gets the full amount awarded, and often forces the sale of the crop, or anything else the poor fellow possesses, to himself, at his own price. Not only is seed-corn, but meal for his present subsistence, often purchased in this way. The poor fellow is hopelessly ground down by this system, which is sufficiently calculated to feed and encourage his natural recklessness and improvidence, and is the fruitful source of innumerable disputes and heart-burnings.⁸²

The merchants and traders had, as is well known, significant supporters within government circles, as the Whig government's dogma was that free trade should be maintained, whatever the costs might be in respect of the loss of human life. In a lengthy discourse, penned in October 1846, on the objectives underpinning famine-relief policy in Ireland, Charles Trevelyan described the principles that shaped the response of the government to a well-known critic, Lord Monteagle, a Whig grandee and prominent Irish landowner in Limerick: 'In the great distribution of society it falls to the share of the Government to protect the merchant and the agriculturalists in the free exercise of their respective employments, but not itself to carry on those employments'.⁸³ It was this reliance on the perfect operation of the market that ensured that throughout the famine years significant military resources were devoted to protecting the transportation and supply of food.

⁸² William Bennett, *Narrative of a Recent Journey of Six Weeks in Ireland* (London, 1847), p. 7. Italics as in original.

⁸³ Dublin, National Library of Ireland [hereafter NLI], Monteagle Papers, MS 13,397/1, Trevelyan to Monteagle, 9 Oct. 1846.

III

Interviewed by the Irish Folklore Commission in the 1940s, a man in his sixties from Knocknagree in north-west County Cork recalled how the farmers in his locality acted during the Famine: ‘In my young days I used to hear old people discuss the awful cruelty practiced by farmers who were fairly well-off against the poorer and less comfortable neighbours ...

Several people would be glad if the Famine times were altogether forgotten so that the cruel doings of their forebears would not be again renewed and talked about by their neighbours’.⁸⁴

While the specific charge he had in mind was land-grabbing during the late 1840s, the general sentiment is that communal solidarity evaporated in the face of the disaster.⁸⁵

Conversely, another man born in 1845, who apparently suffered from famine ‘fever’ as an infant, remembered that the farmers around the village of Elphin, County Roscommon, were known for their generosity, preferring to ‘have a good prayer than a stone of potatoes [at] that time’.⁸⁶ As a tailor in the town, he was, however, largely dependent on the local farmers for business, which may well have influenced this paean to the generosity of his social superiors. Timothy O’Neill has argued that, before the Great Famine, farmers were generous in helping the poor, giving alms and potatoes, and such was the extent of their charity that some British officials believed it perpetuated dependency.⁸⁷ Writing in 1830, the English author J.E.

Bicheno observed, however, that in Ireland it was primarily the poor who helped the even poorer:

⁸⁴ C. Póirtéir, *Famine Echoes* (Dublin, 1995), pp. 217–18; see also Quinlan, “‘A Punishment from God’”, p. 78.

⁸⁵ On land-grabbing in the 1840s and 1850s and the associated social tensions arising from it, see B. MacSuibhne, *The End of Outrage: Post-Famine Adjustment in Rural Ireland* (Oxford, 2017).

⁸⁶ F. Mac Coluim, ‘An Old Man’s Memories’, *Béaloides*, iv (1933), p. 178. The respondent was Michael Gaynor, of Elphin, Co. Roscommon. Interestingly, the 1901 census records his year of birth as 1847, and his ability to speak Irish, something which he later denied in this interview, undertaken in November 1932.

⁸⁷ O’Neill, ‘Poverty in Ireland’, p. 23.

Perhaps there is no country where the kindness of the poor to one another acts more beneficially, while the rich exercise their benevolence by the same indiscriminate distribution of the potato at their own gates ... The most compassionate class will always be the poor themselves, not only because they can sympathize practically with want, but among them the affections of the heart are the chief medium of communication of man with his fellow-man, and reason is not substituted for feeling. This is remarkably the case in Ireland, where the great source of relief for the indigent is the poor cotters.⁸⁸

Whether such views continued to be widely shared by Catholic strong farmers after the introduction of the poor law in 1838, and the requirement to pay the poor rate, is another matter.⁸⁹ The sense that the responsibility of looking after the poor had now shifted to the boards of guardians may have been more widely shared than solely by landlords.

Strong farmers were part of the commercialised network of Famine Ireland, selling their produce at the local market or directly to traders or merchants. It is true that farmers had mixed fortunes, as Ó Gráda has pointed out, and the numbers emigrating in the later years of the Famine is evidence of declining standards of living.⁹⁰ Prior to the destruction of the potato crop, the commercialisation of agriculture was generating significant profits for the graziers and strong farmers, especially in the east and south of the country.⁹¹ During the early

⁸⁸ James Ebenezer Bicheno, *Ireland and its Economy: Being the Result of Observations made in a Tour through the Country in the Autumn of 1829* (London, 1830), pp. 251–2. I owe the reference to O'Neill, 'Poverty in Ireland', p. 23, n. 12.

⁸⁹ G. O'Brien, 'The Establishment of Poor-Law Unions in Ireland, 1838–43', *Irish Historical Studies*, xxiii (1982), pp. 97–120; V. Crossman, *Poverty and the Poor Law in Ireland, 1850–1914* (Liverpool, 2013), pp. 6ff.; for the wider context, see P. Gray, *The Making of the Irish Poor Law, 1815–43* (Manchester, 2009), p. 306.

⁹⁰ Ó Gráda, *Black '47*, p. 125.

⁹¹ S. O'Brien, *Famine and Community in Mullingar Poor Law Union, 1845–1849: Mud Huts and Fat Bullocks* (Dublin, 1999), p. 12; Hynes, 'The Great Hunger and Irish Catholicism', pp. 141–3; G. Ó Tuathaigh, *Ireland Before the Famine* (Dublin, 1972), pp. 127–36; L.M. Cullen, *An Economic History of Ireland Since 1660* (2nd edn, London, 1987), pp. 109–19.

years of the crisis, as prices for essential foodstuffs rose, they were in a position to gain financially. The first sign of a devastated crop created opportunities for some. Even as early as November 1845, farmers in Offaly were postponing threshing their oats until they could judge the extent of the potato harvest.⁹² In October 1845, when it first emerged that potatoes would be scarce, it was reported in the press that potato buyers were holding off making produce available on the market in the expectation of higher prices.⁹³ In June 1846, Elizabeth Smith observed how the forestalling by strong farmers was contributing to the misery of the labourers in west Wicklow:

The scarcity of the potatoes is little felt by the farmers it being caused principally by the stocks having been kept back from the markets in the expectation of prices rising continually which system pressed heavily on the labouring purchasers in which class the failure of the crop had been the commonest owing to inferior [*sic*] management.⁹⁴

Similar reports emerged, of supplies of potatoes being held back from the market by strong farmers, as prices rose steeply in the autumn of 1846.⁹⁵ For farmers with large holdings of cereal crops, the steep rise in grain prices in late 1846, of over 50 per cent, ensured that good profits were to be had.⁹⁶ In the districts around Mullingar, for instance, ‘the large farmers’ haggards [storage yards] were full’, causing tensions with landlords who were reluctant to grant abatements on rent to those holding over thirty acres, knowing they were not suffering like the rest.⁹⁷ At a public meeting held at the Royal Exchange in Dublin (now City Hall) in October 1846, prominent citizens called on the government to give a loan to create work

⁹² T.P. O’Neill, ‘The Famine in Offaly’, in W. Nolan and T.P. O’Neill, eds., *Offaly: History and Society* (Dublin, 1998), p. 686.

⁹³ *Freeman’s Journal*, 27 Oct. 1845.

⁹⁴ Grant, *The Highland Lady in Ireland*, p. 230 (2 June 1846).

⁹⁵ Ó Gráda, *Black ’47*, p. 135, citing Daly, ‘Farming and Famine’, p. 41.

⁹⁶ M.E., in Ó Gráda, ed., *Famine 150*, p. 41.

⁹⁷ O’Brien, *Famine and Community in Mullingar Poor Law Union*, p. 25.

through the construction of railways. The Earl of Milltown underscored the paradoxical relationship between food supply and the plight of the poor:

... and yet in the first week of October—the corn laws having being abolished—a large portion of the potato crop still remaining, and a very abundant harvest of corn husbanded—we are in such a position that through these two circumstances—the forced prices on the one hand, connected with forestalling, and on the other timidity in thrashing out the grain and consuming it—the people are driven wild with famine while the country is absolutely teeming with abundance (hear, hear).⁹⁸

In early 1847, the MP and political economist George Poulett Scrope declared in a parliamentary debate that farmers were holding back thrashing their corn until prices rose. He cited a letter from a clergyman in Galway, who stated that there was ‘food enough in Ireland to feed the population, but the farmers are waiting for higher prices before they thrashed out their corn’. The anonymous correspondent asked ‘if the screw ought not to be put upon them!’.⁹⁹ Another newspaper, drawing on reports from Leinster in September 1847, made the point with even greater force: ‘A ruinous and oppressive system of forestalling is practised here, much to the prejudice of the humbler classes’.¹⁰⁰ While there is evidence of forestalling and holding back produce until prices rose, this was more likely to occur in the early years, when farmers responded to a shortage in the availability of potatoes along the classic lines of market behaviour. Waiting for higher prices was an understandable, if morally suspect, strategy. Strong farmers ran commercial enterprises, and acted in line with the dictates of the market, assessing when to bring food for sale, and when to hold back until, it was hoped, prices rose. Profit rather than empathy was the key consideration.

⁹⁸ *Freeman's Journal*, 3 Oct. 1846.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 23 Jan. 1847.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 21 Sept. 1847.

The uncertainties of the market as they affected ‘snug’ farmers (those with roughly fifty acres or thereabouts) were clear to Alexander Somerville, the Scottish journalist and free trade campaigner, when visiting Carlow town in January 1847. A ‘panic’ ensued when the local dealers, who were ‘always holding back in hope of higher prices’, conspired to spread rumours of a sharp drop in the prices paid for wheat and oats. The ploy worked, and the farmers descended on the town, offering to sell, but ‘the millers would not buy, in hopes of forcing them still further into the panic’.¹⁰¹ There were also accusations that potatoes were being bought up by regraters—middlemen who purchased goods directly from the producers—before they entered local markets and then sold on at enormous profits.¹⁰² At harvest time in 1847, the micro-dynamics of the market were obvious in the town of Birr, County Offaly. Even though the potato crop in the immediate district escaped the worst ravages of the blight during the partial failure of that year, prices were still high due to ‘the pernicious practice of forestalling, which is carried on extensively. When a load of potatoes appears in the market, it is immediately pounced upon by those regraters, who charge immense profits. By these persons the poor are plundered’.¹⁰³ Such activities, widely seen as reprehensible, were an entirely predictable outcome of the operation of the market economy.

These effects were clear to the Baltiboy's diarist Elizabeth Smith, as she observed how different classes were faring in the early months of 1847, when the famine hit the Irish poor really hard:

¹⁰¹ Alexander Somerville, *Letters from Ireland during the Famine of 1847*, ed. K.D.M. Snell (Dublin, 1994), p. 34.

¹⁰² *The Times*, 20 March 1846, 11 April 1846. In the medieval era, forestalling and regrating were prohibited by statute; for the legislative history, see R.H. Britnell, ‘*Forstall*, Forestalling and the Statute of Forestallers’, *English Historical Review*, cii (1987), pp. 89–102.

¹⁰³ *Freeman's Journal*, 3 Sept. 1847. For the history of the Famine in County Offaly, see O'Neill, ‘The Famine in Offaly’; C. Reilly, ‘King's County during the Great Famine: “Poverty and Plenty”’, in J. Crowley, W.J. Smyth and M. Murphy, eds., *Atlas of the Great Irish Famine, 1845–52* (Cork, 2012), pp. 349–53; C. Reilly, *John Plunket Joly and the Great Famine in King's County* (Dublin, 2012). Offaly is a particularly revealing case-study, since heavily commercialised agriculture dominated there, with a strong farming interest.

Provisions are rising every market. Thus the large farmer is doing well, his produce selling for three times the prices of an ordinary year, his consumption though more costly still very fairly proportioned to his profits. The small farmer is ruined, he must eat his corn, sell his stock at an unreasonable time because he has no fodder and therefore leave himself penniless for the coming year. The tradesman has no custom whatever, people buying nothing but food; he must live on his capital if he have any; if he have none, he is bankrupt. The Labourer can just keep four individuals alive on his earnings—two scanty meals a day, no fuel, clothing, house rent, and near a fast on Sunday. Where his family is larger and no son big enough to help with work they must be very near starving.¹⁰⁴

But the actions of snug farmers could extend beyond simply hoarding supplies to the potentially life-threatening refusal to provide conacre (the source of much agrarian unrest in Ireland before the Famine), or simply letting labourers go. In King's County, tenants from Ballyboy complained that strong farmers were not hiring any labour 'because they are wallowing in the riches of this world'.¹⁰⁵ Somerville described very simply the effect of not obtaining conacre: 'the refusal is equivalent to the sentence of death on the population'.¹⁰⁶ His memorable account of the situation in Roscommon in February 1847 perceptively identifies this fate:

Where I now write, the people are literally crawling to their graves, their eyes starting in their heads with stomach torture. But it was only this time two years that these people, in their struggles to produce food for themselves, took spades and dug up grass pastures, pleading to be allowed to pay £7 and £8 per acre for the potato crop, besides furnishing the labour and the seed potatoes; and they

¹⁰⁴ Grant, *The Highland Lady in Ireland*, p. 303 (28 Feb. 1847).

¹⁰⁵ Quoted in Reilly, 'King's County During the Great Famine', p. 349.

¹⁰⁶ Somerville, *Letters from Ireland during the Famine of 1847*, p. 78.

were fired upon, some of them wounded, and some shot dead by the military and constabulary, because they insisted on having conacre for potatoes or oats ...

Four fifths of all the inhabitants of this county get their bare subsistence from the land by hiring it in conacre from other tenants . They cannot pay the enormous rentals of £7, £8, £9, and £10 per acre. But they engage to pay them in labour.

They work for 6d. and 8d. a-day, and their wages are allowed in rent; what they cannot pay thus they pay by the seizure of the crop and its sale under distraint.¹⁰⁷

One of the reasons cited for dispensing with the services of labourers was the higher cost of feeding them as food prices rose.¹⁰⁸ Other widely reported responses were dismissing labourers in the expectation that the public works schemes could support them, or offering them very low wages.¹⁰⁹ Accusations of strong farmers sending their sons to seek employment on the public works schemes were widespread, as were all sorts of claims of favouritism and jobbery when it came to the allocation of ‘tickets’—that is, a place on the works—in 1846.¹¹⁰ Around Ennis, Captain Wynne accused a local committee of striking off the destitute from the public works list and replacing them with comfortable farmers.¹¹¹ For landlords, tenant farmers seemed exclusively concerned with protection of their own selfish interests and largely content to leave the provision of employment in the hands of others.

The role of farmers on local relief committees is less well known: there was an obvious conflict of interests, in that strong farmers sold oaten and wheaten meal to these

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 77–8.

¹⁰⁸ Daly, ‘Farming and the Famine’, pp. 40–41.

¹⁰⁹ Marnane, ‘The Famine in South Tipperary: Part 2’, *Tipperary Historical Journal*, n.v. (1997), p. 141.

¹¹⁰ O’Brien, *Famine and Community in Mullingar Poor Law Union*, p. 27.

¹¹¹ C. Ó Murchadha, *Sable Wings Over the Land: Ennis, County Clare and its Wider Community During the Great Famine, 1845–1852* (Ennis, 1998), p. 95.

committees, presumably accumulating a tidy profit in the process.¹¹² Much of the work on poor law guardians has concentrated, understandably, on the effects of their decisions, yet an analysis of the micro-politics of meetings would serve to show if there were clear divergences of views on the appropriate relief response, which became of critical significance after the end of the ‘temporary’ relief measures in 1847. In his influential study, William L. Feingold implicitly suggests that the compliant tenant farmers who were elected to serve as guardians were content to follow the instructions of their social superiors in the early years of the poor law.¹¹³ Yet the elections themselves often exposed the divisions within rural Ireland, with Catholic priests seeking to subvert the control of the landlords by supporting less malleable candidates.¹¹⁴ As Timothy O’Neill concludes, ‘tenant farmers could also have done more but for them the battle for survival was their primary concern ... The uncertainty of their position made their lives difficult’.¹¹⁵ It was a case of the survival of the fittest, and notions of the common good were hastily dispensed with in a time of deep crisis.

IV

‘Go on Father, go on. Lock the gates to God’s house. Sure they were locked at the time of the Famine too. No priest died at the time of the Famine: only poor people like us.’ So declared fiercely the Bull McCabe, in the film version of John B. Keane’s *The Field* (1990).¹¹⁶ Strictly speaking he was wrong. Many priests did, indeed, perish after contracting

¹¹² O’Brien, *Famine and Community in Mullingar Poor Law Union*, p. 25.

¹¹³ W.L. Feingold, *The Revolt of the Tenantry: The Transformation of Local Government in Ireland, 1872–1886* (Boston, MA, 1984).

¹¹⁴ For the early years of the poor law elections and the establishment of the system more generally, see G. O’Brien, ‘The Establishment of the Poor-Law Unions in Ireland, 1838–43’, *Irish Historical Studies*, xxiii (1982), pp. 97–120, and V. Crossman, *Local Government in Nineteenth-Century Ireland* (Belfast, 1994), pp. 46–7. For one case of a dispute between a Catholic priest and a local landlord in west Wicklow, see A. Tod, ‘The Smiths of Baltiboys: A Co. Wicklow Family and their Estate in the 1840s’ (Univ. of Edinburgh Ph.D. thesis, 1978), pp. 136–8.

¹¹⁵ O’Neill, ‘The Famine in Offaly’, p. 715.

¹¹⁶ *The Field* (1990) (Dir: J. Sheridan).

famine-related diseases, though no case is known of a man of the cloth who starved.¹¹⁷ The view that the Catholic clergy, like other members of the petite bourgeoisie such as the shopkeepers, traders and strong farmers, escaped the worst ravages of the Famine is an enduring one.

The secular Catholic clergy, for the most part Maynooth-trained, were drawn from the serried ranks of the middle classes, primarily the sons of strong farmers, merchants and the urban commercial elite.¹¹⁸ As one student who studied at Maynooth in the late 1840s recalled, his fellow seminarians were ‘the sons of persons in business and trade in the cities and provincial towns, and the sons of the comfortable, middle and humble farmers in the country’.¹¹⁹ There were, of course, variations in income and status, but the critical distinction was between the urban and rural poor, such as smallholders and cottiers, and the lower middle classes.¹²⁰ Some British commentators were at pains to point to the humble origins of the Catholic clergy, though this was relative to the well born recusant English Catholic priest. Additionally, there was a strain within British elite thinking that fiercely resented the authority granted to the priest by the faithful, especially the poor. Denigration by social snobbery was a useful mechanism for expressing this resentment.¹²¹

Priests combined a multiplicity of pastoral, political and leadership roles, but with greater intensity during the hungry years than in ‘normal’ times: offering spiritual solace to the dying and performing sacraments, acting as local representatives, attending meetings of

¹¹⁷ For numbers of priests who perished, see T.P. O’Neill, ‘The Catholic Clergy and the Great Famine’, *Reportorium Novum*, i (1956), p. 463; D.A. Kerr, *‘A Nation of Beggars’: Priests, People, and Politics in Famine Ireland, 1846–1852* (Oxford, 1994), pp. 42–3; K. O’Shea, ‘In the Line of Duty: Priests who Ministered to the Famine Victims’, in M. Costello, ed., *The Famine in Kerry* ([Tralee], 1997), pp. 28–31.

¹¹⁸ Connolly, *Priests and People*, pp. 32–43; see also E. Larkin, *The Pastoral Role of the Roman Catholic Church in Pre-Famine Ireland, 1750–1850* (Dublin, 2006), pp. 52–60.

¹¹⁹ Connolly, *Priests and People*, p. 37.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

¹²¹ Kerr, *‘A Nation of Beggars’*, pp. 15–16.

relief committees, mediating with the various arms of official and private relief bodies, and serving to keep the peace when popular protests broke out. Priests caught up the crisis were in an extraordinarily difficult position, with very little power to change anything. One traveller who visited Ireland in 1846 underscored the relationship between the priest and his flock: ‘The poor, desolate Irishman clings to his priest, as to his best—and in many cases, only friend.’¹²² Finely-drawn local studies from across the country serve to show how parish priests and curates sought to bring attention to the plight of the poor within their parishes by petitioning the Relief Commission to provide help.¹²³ For instance, the Rev. Michael Comyn, parish priest of Kilfeargh and Killard, near Kilkee, in West Clare, played an active role in the local relief committee, consistently lobbied the Relief Commission for assistance, was part of a deputation that met in January 1847 with Henry Labouchere, the chief secretary, requesting more public works, and also apparently organised a large demonstration outside Kilrush workhouse in December 1847 demanding outdoor relief.¹²⁴ Comyn was a leader who combined the political with the pastoral, and in doing so both earned the censure of the poor law inspector, Captain Arthur Kennedy, and maintained the respect of his flock:

A more bare faced attempt at intimidation I have never seen—four fifths of the mob were from ‘Kilkee’ and a part of the ‘Moyarta’ district—and it is with pain I am constrained to believe they were encouraged and incited to this turbulent demonstration by their Roman Catholic pastor with a view to compel the Guardians to give indiscriminate ‘outdoor relief’. This Reverend Gentleman’s

¹²² Mrs F. West [Theresa John Cornwallis West], *A Summer Visit to Ireland in 1846* (London, 1847), p. 138.

¹²³ See, for example, MacDonald, ‘A Time of Desolation’; Ó Murchadha, *Sable Wings Over the Land*.

¹²⁴ I. Murphy, *A Starving People: Life and Death in West Clare, 1845–1851* (Dublin, 1996), pp. 12–20, 35, 62.

conduct is I fear generally an exception to that of his Brother Clergymen in this Union—who seek to mitigate suffering and support the law.¹²⁵

Whether Comyn was directly involved in organising the protest or not, he was treading the fine line between acting on behalf of the poor and ensuring that collective action did not spill over into wholesale violence. In numerous accounts of confrontations between the hungry and the various arms of authority—relief administrators, police and magistrates—the priest was the intermediary, called upon by fearful officials when faced with the ‘mob’. Well-respected clerics often intervened and persuaded angry crowds to disperse, sometimes after securing some sort of compromise, be it distribution of food at lower prices in the early years of the Famine or an undertaking to initiate relief works. In October 1846, when a large crowd gathered at the mill in O’Briensbridge in east Clare, the local priest dissuaded the people from attacking the mill after negotiating the sale of meal at cost price with the owner.¹²⁶ There are many accounts of occasions when violence and disorder were either avoided or quelled after the intervention of the local priest.¹²⁷ Lord Monteagle, a well-informed landlord, confided to Richard Griffith of the Board of Works that the Catholic priests were acting to preserve ‘tranquillity’, especially when relief works were delayed in late 1846.¹²⁸ Even Lord Clarendon, certainly no friend of the Irish Catholic Church, concluded in February 1848 that ‘I don’t believe any clergy in Europe work harder or undergo greater privations with more patience and good will’.¹²⁹ Such a view was earlier voiced by Charles Trevelyan, observing that the Catholic clergy, ‘who possess the largest

¹²⁵ Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 62.

¹²⁶ S. Kierse, *The Famine Years in the Parish of Killaloe, 1845–1851* (Killaloe, 1984), pp. 26–7.

¹²⁷ Kerr, ‘*A Nation of Beggars*’, pp. 34–6.

¹²⁸ NLI, Monteagle Papers, MS 12,396/8, Monteagle to Griffith, 30 Sept. 1846.

¹²⁹ Quoted in D.A. Kerr, *Peel, Priests and Politics: Sir Robert Peel’s Administration and the Roman Catholic Church in Ireland, 1841–1846* (Oxford, 1982), p. 29.

share of influence over the people of Ireland, have well performed their part'.¹³⁰ This concern for maintaining the social order was essentially a middle-class one, centred on promoting respectability; it was shared by other groups, such as strong farmers, and both the priests and the farmers had much to fear from widespread social disorder or revolutionary impulses.

Within popular culture, the priest had long been viewed as both a leader and a hero—a legacy of the persecution of the church during the Penal Era; living up to these expectations was much more than just a matter of keeping up appearances.¹³¹ In the summer of 1848, the Catholic parish priest of Kildacomogue, near Castlebar, County Mayo, the Rev. Francis Keogh, fled from his parish, and hid out with a friend in Galway, 'retreating from the importunities of his unfortunate parishioners'.¹³² He was forced to leave after his flock put him under unbearable pressure: the neighbouring parish received relief from Archbishop Murray's committee in Dublin, but Keogh had not secured any money for his own parish. His failure led to his fall from grace in the eyes of his parishioners, who 'felt jealous with me for not having procured them the same advantages'.¹³³ Apparently, after securing some relief, he returned—duly humbled—to his parish. This event shows how important was the significance of being seen to be a leader, and, equally, the consequences of being seen to be a failure.

In Doon, County Limerick, folklore sources recount that a local priest, the Rev. Patrick Hickey, had a big field of turnips and two men guarding it, 'lest any poor person might take a turnip to save himself or herself from death'.¹³⁴ Hickey had his principles, however, and solemnly maintained that people should be prepared to die for their faith rather

¹³⁰ NLI, Monteagle Papers, MS 13, 397/1, Trevelyan to Monteagle, 9 Oct. 1846.

¹³¹ See D. Ó hOgháin, *The Hero in Irish Folk History* (Dublin, 1985), esp. pp. 205–15.

¹³² D. Bowen, *Souperism: Myth or Reality* (Cork, 1970), p. 119. This story is also recounted in Kerr, 'A Nation of Beggars', pp. 41.

¹³³ Bowen, *Souperism*, p. 118.

¹³⁴ NFS, MS 407, p. 275 (Mrs B. Ryan, interviewed 24 Oct. 1937).

than seek help from the local Protestant minister, who insisted that the price of free meal was renouncing the errors of Catholicism. If the poor could not rely on the generosity of their pastor, local legend has it that relief could come from a supernatural source. One man from the townland of Gortavalla could no longer bear the cries of hunger and suffering of his children, and told his wife he was going to the minister for meal:

‘Don’t attempt to do any such thing’ says the wife, ‘let them all die for God sooner than we’ll forsake our religion. There’s enough cat breacs (the Doon word for one who takes soup during the Famine years)’. She goes to Kenny’s Well, going over the style, finds a half-crown in the ditch, and bought meal in Doon ... Every time that woman’s children came from America, they paid many a visit to Kenny’s Well.¹³⁵

Apparently, the woman’s unshakeable faith also earned her the admiration of Hickey, who was so moved that he gave her a half-sovereign, and she bought more meal and was able to help her neighbours.

A well-known priest was the Rev. John Murphy, the ‘Black Eagle’, as he was dubbed by the indigenous peoples in Canada with whom he lived while employed by the Hudson Bay Company. Murphy, from the family of the famous Cork brewing company, entered the priesthood in the early 1840s and had worked with poor Irish emigrants in Liverpool before his recall to Ireland to act as chaplain to the Presentation Convent in Bandon, County Cork, and also to serve the local workhouse. He was then despatched in 1847 to the village of Goleen, near Schull, to combat the activities of William Allen Fisher, the vicar of Kilmoe and chair of the local relief committee, who was offering work building a Protestant church,

¹³⁵ *Ibid.* On Kenny’s Well, see C. Ó Danachair, ‘The Holy Wells of County Limerick’, *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*, lxxxv (1955), p. 205.

known locally as *Tempall na mBocht* (temple of the poor), in exchange for conversion.¹³⁶ Murphy's methods of reclaiming the 'misguided sheep' were unorthodox. First, he rode into town on a black horse, bedecked with a long flowing cloak, 'like a visit from the warrior angel, Michael'.¹³⁷ On Sunday mornings, he stood on the wall of the Protestant church and 'exhorted his people to return to their Father's house'. Apparently this unorthodox method resulted in many of the converts returning to the fold. Combating evangelical Protestant activities was, of course, an ancillary task during the Famine years, as more immediate concerns took precedence. Folklore accounts stress the role of the priest in resisting souperism (inducement to change religion for food or other material benefits), not only on the part of missionaries but also that of local landlords or clergy with an evangelical predisposition.¹³⁸ There is also in these sources an underlying assumption that only those of the weakest moral fibre from the underclass would ever convert for material aid. Yet such assumptions betray a lack of empathy with the dilemma facing desperately poor people, teetering, on a day-to-day basis, between life and death.

V

Markets continued to operate even when dearth was widespread, priests helped the poor, merchants made profits, and strong farmers hoarded supplies in the hope of higher prices—all eminently predictable actions when the potato crop failed. Most sought to retain some

¹³⁶ For a glowing account of Fisher's activities during the Famine, see J.H. Cole, *Church and Parish Records of the United Diocese of Cork, Cloyne and Ross* (Cork, 1903), pp. 72–3.

¹³⁷ A.J. Reilly, *Father John Murphy: Famine Priest* (Dublin, 1963), p. 74; see P. Hickey, *Famine in West Cork: The Mizen Peninsula, Land and People, 1800–1852* (Cork, 2002), pp. 240–41.

¹³⁸ NFC, MS 1834, pp. 134–7; MS 188, pp. 375–8; R. McHugh, 'The Famine in Irish Oral Tradition', in R.D. Edwards and T.D. Williams, eds., *The Great Famine: Studies in Irish History, 1845–52* (Dublin, 1956), pp. 409–12.

elements of their social status. Other people were unable to do so, and many died of disease. What is most surprising is that the Great Famine is still understood, in popular memory at least, as a universal experience, when clearly it was not. It exposed long-established divisions between the smallholders, cottiers and labourers and the snug farmers, who ultimately emerged even stronger by acquiring extra land and through the removal of the cottiers and the labourers from the landscape.¹³⁹ As Andrés Erickson has reminded us, the conflict about food exports was ‘not only between Irish and English interest or between peasants and landlords, it was also a conflict within the Irish agricultural community’, between the poor and the strong farmers and tradespeople.¹⁴⁰ When discussing the activities of the local relief committee in Fánaid, County Donegal, Hugh Dorian in his vivid memoir identifies the ‘men who should have better feeling towards the weak and the hungry’, and writes of how the ‘poor were treated and despised as if they were beings of quite a different creation’.¹⁴¹ Catholic priests were different, however, in acting as what T.P. O’Neill terms the ‘natural leaders of the people’, playing a critical role in drawing attention to the plight of the poor, disbursing charitable donations, giving voice to the powerless, and, not least, tending to those near death.¹⁴² The daily life of the Catholic priest, especially in the west and south-west, was one of offering the living hope and ministering to the dying.

Can Ireland’s Great Famine be seen as a failure of leadership by the Catholic middle classes? Unlike landlords or government officials, their power to shape the course of events was limited. Nevertheless, some of the actions by strong farmers or merchants demonstrated a rejection of the basic values of charity and humanity. There was at times a glaring deficit of compassion. On the issue of responsibility, the responses of the Catholic middle classes have

¹³⁹ See J. Lee, ‘The Famine as History’, in Ó Gráda, ed., *Famine 150*, p. 172.

¹⁴⁰ Eiriksson, ‘Food Supply and Food Riots’, in Ó Gráda, ed., *Famine 150*, p. 84.

¹⁴¹ Hugh Dorian, *The Outer Edge of Ulster: A Memoir of Social Life in Nineteenth-Century Donegal*, ed. B. Mac Suibhne and D. Dickson (Dublin, 2000), pp. 222–3.

¹⁴² O’Neill, ‘Catholic Clergy’, pp. 469.

been pushed aside in favour of debates about the role of government; undoubtedly, ultimate authority rested with the Westminster parliament. But the fact that only one O'Connellite MP voted against the infamous Gregory clause that set in train widespread evictions and clearances by inhumane landlords was telling in itself.¹⁴³ The Liberator's nephew, Morgan John O'Connell, spoke in favour of the clause, describing it as a 'valuable alteration'.¹⁴⁴ An evangelical writer, John East, who visited the 'sister island' in 1847, may not have been far from the truth when he reported having had conversations with people which led him to believe that there were 'not a few who think that the destruction of one or two millions of her people would be no loss, but a boon to Ireland, however they might perish'.¹⁴⁵

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¹⁴³ Hansard, *Parliamentary Debates*, 3rd ser., House of Commons, 29 March 1847, vol. 91, col. 593.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, col. 590.

¹⁴⁵ John East, *Glimpses of Ireland in 1847* (London, 1847), p. 16.