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. For those disposed to judge the British government harshly, its most serious sins have included its adamant refusal to stop the export of domestically produced grain, especially in the winter of 1846-7, its unwillingness to prevent or even to slow down the mass evictions, or clearances, of perhaps a half-million persons, and the implementation of a poor-law system that greatly facilitated clearances and was woefully inadequate in providing relief to the famine-stricken population. But even if we are inclined to censure the British government severely, we must seek to understand the political and ideological context in which such important government decisions were made. Though some considerable strides have recently been taken in this direction,^{1} a great deal remains to be uncovered about British public opinion (especially middle-class opinion) and its shifting currents in relation to Ireland during the famine. In this essay I focus primarily on parliamentary and public attitudes to the Poor Law Amendment Act of June 1847 and to its disastrous consequences in Ireland thereafter. It was this law that radically shifted the burden of providing public relief away from the British treasury, placing it instead squarely on the shoulders of Irish landlords and tenants. It was also this same law which drastically increased the weight of that burden by authorising relief outside the workhouses in a broad array of circumstances. In so doing, this law powerfully contributed to the famine clearances, which were specifically facilitated by one of its provisions — the notorious Gregory or quarter-acre clause.^{2}

It is generally recognised that the 1847 Poor Law Amendment Act embodied the principle popular in Britain that Irish property must support Irish poverty. But not sufficiently appreciated are the vehemence and the scope of the attacks made in Britain on Irish landlords and the Irish land system before, dur-


^{2} For discussions of the Poor Law Amendment Act of June 1847 and the Gregory or quarter-acre clause, see Christine Kinealy, This Great Calamity: The Irish Famine, 1845-52 (Dublin, 1994), pp. 180-4, 216-27.
ing, and after the passage of this legislation. So neglectful of their duties and so oppressive had Irish landed proprietors allegedly been over several generations that they were widely held in Britain to have created the conditions that led to the famine. The Illustrated London News delivered a sweeping condemnation in March 1847:

The tales of ejectments, clearings, and all the long list of legal but heartless practices that reach England from the other side of the channel have hardened Englishmen against those who have for centuries held the fate of Ireland in their hands. The plain fact is before us, too dreadfully evident to be overlooked: with the possession of the property of the island, an absolute monopoly of political power, patronage, and place — the dominant class in Ireland have reduced both England and Ireland to this.3

It was frequently asserted, however, that by pampering Irish landlords in the years since the Act of Union in 1800, the British parliament was at least partly to blame: 'There were no laws it would not pass at their request, and no abuse it would not defend for them', declared the London News in February.4 Through its persistent neglect, confessed the Times in March, wealthy Britain had permitted in Ireland 'a mass of poverty, disaffection, and degradation without a parallel in the world. It allowed proprietors to suck the very life-blood of that wretched race.'5 According to John Arthur Roebuck, the independent Radical MP for Bath, Irish landlords were 'very much like slaveholders, with white slaves' and 'had been made so very much by English legislation'.6 By shamelessly exploiting their tenants, Irish landlords, insisted the London News, had reduced them to serfdom, 'and the Irish cotter is as much a serf as the Russian peasant, with the difference that he is worse fed ...'.7 The Times too spoke of pre-famine Ireland as having displayed 'the worst symptoms of eastern despotism polluting the surface of a free empire', along with 'the worst privations of Turkish and Russian slavery'.8

The predatory character of Irish landlordism was widely attributed in England to the deep financial indebtedness of so many Irish landlords. 'As a body it appears in a thousand ways that the curse of need and embarrassment is upon them: they are obliged', commented the London News in February 1847, 'to screw and extort the utmost farthing that can be got in any possible way from

3 I.L.N., 20 March 1847.
4 I.L.N., 13 February 1847.
5 Times, 24 March 1847.
6 Hansard's Parliamentary Debates, 3rd series, xc (1847), col. 1030.
7 I.L.N., 20 February 1847.
8 Times, 29 March 1847.
anybody ...’. The *Times* sneered at the Irish landlord in March as ‘the old original pauper of Ireland’ and ‘the grandfather of all destitute persons’. Among ‘the things which disgrace Ireland and disgust Christendom’, the paper declared, were ‘the squalid destitution of the many’ and ‘the unscrupulous necessities of their needy masters’. But the very condition that made predators of Irish landlords in their own country turned them into greedy, clamouring supplicants at Westminster in Britain. Roebuck, one of their fiercest critics there, declared in January of the same year that ‘he had no sympathy whatever for Irish landlords, whom he designated as beggars’. Another Radical, Archibald Hastie, MP for Paisley, contemptuously dismissed Irish landlords in February as a body of men who ‘had done nothing but sit down and howl for English money’. In the press also the Irish landed elite was pictured with a begging bowl in its hands. However much Irish proprietors might differ in other respects, acridly remarked the *London News*, they ‘are ready alike to hold out their hands for loans and grants’ from the government. ‘Give, give,’ was their constant cry to others. The *Times* posed as the protector of British working-class interests against the outright robbery ‘deliberately planned’ by Irish landlords – ‘those shameless and importunate mendicants’, ‘the spoilt pets of the state’. English workers, the paper claimed, paid nine-tenths of all taxes, and thus of the £10 million now being spent on Irish famine relief, ‘they pay nine [million]’. Were English workers ‘to sink into a nation of overworked, underpaid drudges, slaves, helots, mere mechanic operative animals, for the sole purpose of maintaining the landlords of Ireland in disgraceful luxury’? In the inflammatory language of the *Times*, ‘the Irish landlord was counting the millions he could extract from British industry, as coolly as the butcher anticipates in fancy the cutting up of his bullocks and sheep’. From the landlords’ past avoidance of various taxes and their current readiness ‘to harass the government and impose upon the English public new burthens for the performance of duties which they neglect,’ observed the English rural writer Alexander Somerville in March 1847, ‘it will be seen that as a class Irish landowners stand at the very bottom of the scale of honest and honourable men’. No reader of Somerville’s recently republished *Letters from Ireland during the Famine of 1847*, which appeared originally in the *Manchester Examiner*, could fail to perceive the depth of English middle-class hostility to Irish landlords.

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9 *I.L.N.*, 20 February 1847.
10 *Times*, 2 April 1847.
11 *I.L.N.*, 23 January 1847.
12 Hansard’s Parliamentary Debates, 3rd series, lxxxix (1847), col. 955.
13 *I.L.N.*, 6 February 1847.
14 *Times*, 10 March 1847.
16 Ibid., p. 8.
Among the crimes charged against Irish landlords, none perhaps aroused more resentment in Britain early in 1847 than what was seen as their dumping of evicted pauper tenants on the shores of England, Scotland, and Wales. In the British press and in parliament a strong connection was drawn between Irish evictions and the swelling tide of Irish immigrants into Britain, most of them very poor and many of them diseased. Liverpool took the brunt of this so-called Irish 'invasion', with as many as 50,000 pouring into that port city during the month of March alone, and with many of the new arrivals dying in the streets or crowding into its hospitals and workhouses. In driving their pauper tenants across the Irish Sea to Britain, Irish landlords were widely held to be capitalising on the knowledge that in extremities these destitute people would be supported there under the English poor law. Thus Irish immunity from a poor law which recognised even a limited right to outdoor relief became in British eyes another means by which Irish proprietors evaded their social responsibilities and shifted a burden which properly belonged to them onto the shoulders of British taxpayers. As the Times complained in April, 'Liverpool, Manchester, and Bristol pay with vicarious infliction the penalty of English indifference [to the inadequacies of the Irish poor law] and Irish immunity'. And the paper warned that unless the Irish poor law were amended to provide for substantial outdoor relief, 'every port, every city in this island, will atone for its political negligence by the actual presence of that [Irish] poverty' which it had not insisted that parliament direct to be relieved in Ireland. It was not only a question of money but also one of physical and cultural degradation. 'No argument that pen ever writ or heart ever indited [about maintaining the Irish poor at home in Ireland] can match with the spectacle', declared the Times, 'of England positively invaded, overrun, devoured, infected, poisoned, and desolated by Irish pauperism.' Maliciously, the paper suggested that the classical economist Nassau Senior should try to proclaim the virtues of the workhouse test and the evils of outdoor relief in the Liverpool Exchange. It was assumed that he would be about as popular there as evicting Irish landowners.

It was this badly soiled reputation that Irish landlord MPs and their parliamentary allies took into the lengthy debates that surrounded the relief policies of Lord John Russell's Whig government in the early months of 1847. What the parliamentary spokesmen for the Irish landlords wished above all to avoid was any change in the Irish poor law which would result in the general or widespread extension of outdoor relief. Even if filled to capacity and free of epidemic disease, the existing workhouses were capable of accommodating only a small fraction of the three million or more people who were destitute in the

17 Times, 5 April 1847.
18 Times, 20 April 1847.
19 Times, 16 April 1847.
20 Ibid.
spring and summer of 1847. The prospect of extending outdoor relief to these millions filled Irish landlords with dread. They claimed to be ‘willing to submit to any charge’ necessary to further extend workhouse accommodation, but they loudly clamoured for the retention of the workhouse test of destitution for the able-bodied poor. A petition to this effect was signed and presented to parliament by forty-three MPs and sixty-four peers who were said to have residences in both Ireland and Britain.\(^1\)

But British public opinion was horrified at the apparent consequences of conceding what Irish landlords were seeking. They were pilloried and ridiculed for resisting the principle of outdoor relief at the very time, in March 1847, when over 700,000 Irish labourers were receiving it on the public works and would mostly have perished without it. In citing the arguments of such classical economists as Nassau Senior and George Cornewall Lewis against outdoor relief, Irish landlord MPs, said the *Times* dismissively, were citing ‘names which, to all public purposes, not only are dead but stink’; their opinions the paper flatly labelled as ‘putrid’. Against the landlords’ clamour for the maintenance of the workhouse test, the *Times* declared without much exaggeration:

> The workhouses are all full and only hold 100,000, while 4,000,000 are starving. The workhouses too are mere charnel-houses ... Do they expect voluntary aid from the landlords? ... If those 4,000,000 were now left to the spontaneous benevolence of the landlords, they would be as Sennacherib’s army before the 1st of May.\(^2\)

Russell’s government, however, had resolved to amend the Irish poor law in such a way as to allow outdoor relief in the form of food to be given not only to those disabled from labour but also to the able-bodied if the workhouse was full or otherwise incapable of receiving them. The cost of any relief given outside the workhouse was to be charged on the poor rates of the union as a whole, with the landlords paying the entire rate for holdings valued at £4 or less, and about half the rates for holdings valued at more than £4. Union rating and the £4-rating clause were bound to be contentious issues. There was of course a close correlation between districts with deep destitution and areas with a high percentage of holdings valued at £4 or less. The *locus classicus* for this phenomenon was Mayo, where a staggering 75 per cent of all occupiers had holdings in this category, and where destitution was a ubiquitous scourge throughout most of the county.\(^3\) Along with landlords in similar circumstances elsewhere, a Mayo proprietor would now be afflicted not only with a mass of destitute tenants

\(^1\) *Hansard’s Parliamentary Debates*, 3rd series, xc (1847), cols. 1249-50, 1414.

\(^2\) *Times*, 15 March 1847.

paying little or no rent but also with the heavy added drain arising from his total liability for the statutory relief of by far the greater number of them. What landlord would want to keep such tenants?

The government did not much concern itself with this question, but it certainly did worry that if poor rates were charged not on the union as a whole but rather on those chunks of it called electoral divisions, many landlords in particular electoral divisions would be strongly tempted to evict their pauper tenants in the hope that these destitute people would take refuge in some other electoral division, thus freeing the evicting proprietor from claims for their poor relief. As the *Times* was to put it with characteristic pungency, if electoral-division rating were conceded, it would allow estate-clearing landlords to create a multitude of ‘traps for human vermin’, a Skibbereen in every poor-law union, or ‘130 vast almshouses maintained from the public exchequer’. Union rating, by contrast, would equalise burdens by removing the premium on dumping, and in theory it would provide an incentive for proprietors to create employment without their having to fear the imposition of a double burden – the relief of one’s own tenants and of someone else’s besides. But whatever the exact distribution, the landlord burden, especially with the £4-rating clause included, would be great. In fact, taken together, these proposals appeared to spell a staggering load of new taxation for the Irish landed interest.

In terror at this prospect, Irish landlord MPs tried to persuade their British colleagues that the Irish landed interest would be ruined by the proposed legislation. ‘In fact,’ declared William Gregory, the Galway landowner and Tory MP for Dublin city, ‘the whole rental of Ireland would not suffice for the relief which must be required under this bill.’ Apart altogether from demoralising much of the rural population, Gregory argued, the bill would absorb the capital of the country, diminish wages, reduce labourers to paupers, and thus in the end ‘would be more prejudicial to the poor than the rich’. Thomas Bateson, a Conservative MP for County Londonderry, employed essentially the same reasoning to draw an even more alarming picture. ‘If once the right of outdoor relief to able-bodied paupers were established by law,’ he declared,

pauperism would be encouraged, the whole property of the country absorbed, and the population demoralised. Having brought the country into this state of insolvency and ruin, the whole of Ireland would be one monster union, and the prime minister of England the head relieving officer.26

24 *Times*, 8 May 1847.
25 *Hansard’s Parliamentary Debates*, 3rd series, xc (1847), col. 1276.
26 Ibid., col. 1283.
But their dramatic portrayals of the financial disaster which Irish landlords saw ahead failed to elicit much sympathy from English or Scottish MPs or in the British press. The Times doubted that an amended poor law would ‘swamp the landowners’, as their friends alleged. But even if it did, ‘we are not sure that the price is too great to pay for the regeneration of the people ...’.27 The worst enemies of Irish landlords almost hoped for their destruction. Proclaimed Roebuck with implacable bitterness: ‘He would apply the English poor law [with provision for outdoor relief] to Ireland, which, though it might sweep away two-thirds of the Irish landlords, he cared not for [them]’.28 Apparently, Roebuck was not alone. The Irish MP William Gregory openly admitted in the House of Commons that it would not be enough for him to show that ‘all the property in many parts of Ireland would be entirely swallowed up’ by granting outdoor relief to the able-bodied poor, for ‘he feared that, with many members of the house, that would be the chief recommendation of the measure’.29 At least one British newspaper, the Catholic Tablet, happily embraced this extraordinary reasoning: ‘When, therefore, we hear it urged as an objection to the poor laws that a compulsory system of outdoor relief will ruin the landlords, we answer that this is its best possible recommendation’.30 Even much less hostile commentators ridiculed the ‘lamentable stories’ of landlord partisans, heard especially in the House of Lords, about the ‘black and hideous ruin before them’. If Irish landlords ‘could be believed,’ declared the London News, ‘one would think they were the class to be pitied, not the famine-stricken peasantry’. To hear the Irish landlords tell it, ‘there cannot well be a greater affliction than the possession of a few thousands or tens of thousands a year of Irish property. Estates in Ireland are mere myths, fictions; rentals are fabulous; and returns from the land in [the] shape of money are matter of legend and tradition only...’. But the predicted doom of Irish landlords was premature, in the opinion of the London News: ‘Some remaining thousands will still flow in even after the rates are paid; and on the whole the affliction of an estate, even an Irish estate, may continue to be endured’.31

The Whig government easily turned back efforts by the Protectionist Tories and Irish landlord MPs to throw the entire burden of the poor rates on the occupying tenants. The attempt only exacerbated English middle-class revulsion for the Irish landlords’ almost criminal avoidance of their social responsibilities. Even British peers generally failed to support them on this issue. Sensing his isolation, the Protectionist leader Lord Stanley ‘did not venture even to divide’ the House of Lords on his amendment for tenant payment of rates.

27 Times, 29 March 1847.
28 I.L.N., 23 January 1847.
29 Hansard’s Parliamentary Debates, 3rd series, xc (1847), col. 1273.
30 Quoted ibid., col. 1301.
31 I.L.N., 22 May 1847.
'Never', crowed the *London News*, 'did a long-threatened and rather dreaded opposition end so innocently: it was a most lame and impotent conclusion.' Had the effort succeeded, its critics argued, it 'would have made the collection of any rate impossible', so great would have been the outrage among Irish tenants.\footnote{3} Thus British government ministers, many British MPs, and a wide section of the British press were able to project the 1847 Poor Law Amendment Act as a long overdue measure of popular justice as well as a distinctive act of genuine benevolence toward Ireland on the part of the British parliament. The absence of such a measure since the beginning of the famine, asserted the *Times*, had cost England £10 million and Ireland 'probably a hundred thousand lives, not to mention the sufferings of the survivors'.\footnote{33} Almost all of the leading press organs would have agreed with Roebuck's description of the proposed law as 'a great act of justice due to the Irish people, due to them by England'.\footnote{34} For the *Times* the government's bill is the just extension to the Irish poor of the rights long guaranteed to the English poor. It is the chief and most desiderated fruit of the Union. Without this, any legislative connexion between the two countries was a fiction and a fraud. Without this, nine-tenths of the Irish nation were debarred from the privileges which the law and conscience of the state had awarded to their equals in Great Britain.\footnote{35} The proposed law would end the scandalous injustice under which currently the property of Ireland, or so the *London News* claimed, was paying 'about five pence in the pound on its rental by law and, where there is no compulsion, giving little or nothing'.\footnote{36} Citing similar statistics showing how little Irish landlords contributed to poor relief, the *Times* contrasted their parsimony in this regard with their wild extravagance in other respects, such as their heavy outlay for hunting and hounds. Said the paper savagely: 'A class which pampers a population of dogs, and suffers a human population to perish, calls for the hardest terms that eloquent indignation can supply and the sternest treatment that legislation can devise'.\footnote{37} In their justifications for a revamped Irish poor law British newspapers easily mixed arguments based on economic self-interest with others based on the injunctions of Christian charity. Responding to the Protestant archbishop of Dublin,\footnote{32}...
who protested against the imposition of a poor law permitting outdoor relief, the London News found his arguments to be 'singularly cold and hard, and if it be not presumption to say it of a prelate of the church, completely at variance with the doctrines and precepts of the Gospel'. Property was not, as the archbishop maintained, 'a citadel to be defended against the attacks of pauperism'; instead, Christians must recognise 'the duty of sharing our good things with our poorer brethren, to which "the Scripture moveth us in sundry places"'. Of course, British self-interest would be well served by the new law, and with varying degrees of frankness this critical point was made frequently: Irish poverty, massive in its dimensions, could not permanently be allowed to siphon off English wealth. 'Pauperism in Ireland', moaned the London News, is now draining ten million [pounds] a year from the English exchequer; to that the Irish legislators make no objection; it is quite according to 'sound principles'. Englishmen think the drain can be stopped, and [want to] fix Irish property with a rate, as they themselves were saddled with one between two and three centuries ago.\(^{39}\)

What is most remarkable, then, about the discussion of the Great Famine in Britain in early and mid-1847 is the extremely harsh and almost unanimous verdict given against Irish landlords, to the point of holding them primarily responsible for having allowed the country 'to sink to its present awful state'.\(^{40}\) The Poor Law Amendment Act was partly intended as a heavy punishment for their grievous derelictions of duty in the past, and it was also designed to insure that they met their responsibilities in the future. This British fixation on the delinquencies of the Irish landed elite helped to blind much of the educated British public as to how the amended poor law would operate in practice. To judge from the extreme scarcity of comment in the British press at the time of its adoption, the significance of the Gregory clause was missed almost completely. If it was correct to say that melancholy tales of Irish evictions had hardened English hearts against the objections of Irish landlords to a 'real' poor law, it is bitterly ironic that such a poor law was itself so deeply implicated in the clearances and other horrors that followed its enactment.

Recognition of the tragic consequences of the amended poor law was slow to emerge among the British public and press. But an awareness of its devastating impact gradually took hold. The London News conceded early in March 1848 that 'its immediate revision' was 'absolutely necessary to prevent a large and aggravated augmentation of the social evils which afflict the unhappy sister country'. The paper condemned as an 'absurd resolve' the Whig government's

\(^{38}\) *I.L.N.*, 3 April 1847.

\(^{39}\) Ibid.

\(^{40}\) Ibid.
refusal to accede to a request from Irish MPs for a committee of inquiry into the operation of the poor law in Ireland. And by November 1848 the London News seemed ready to recant its earlier faith in the amended poor law and to grant the Irish landlords' case against it. 'All argument' originally supported its introduction, but 

... such is the wide extent of the misery and destitution of that country that the poor law, so just in theory, so fair-sounding, so applicable elsewhere, has broken down ... Small farmers and great landed proprietors are equally pinched or crushed beneath the operation of the law. Without the poor law the people would have died of famine; with a poor law the people are not elevated above habitual and constant pauperism, and the property of the landlords is all but confiscated.

In fact, however, neither the London News nor the Times was ready to jettison the poor law, even if occasionally the language of their editorials suggested otherwise. As late as January 1849 the Times still pronounced itself in favour of 'giving effect to the provisions of the poor law': 'We urge its adoption now, in this season of gloom, despondence, and dismay, because we recognize this to be the only sure protection against the recurrence of other seasons as gloomy and as dismal as the present'. Almost forgetting its past severe criticisms of the poor law, the London News had insisted a month earlier: 'The people of this country must listen to no representations or remonstrances intended to shake their faith in the efficacy of that enactment'. What these quotations suggest is the existence in Britain of a widespread public ambivalence about the real and perceived practical consequences of strictly administering the poor law, an ambivalence that contributed heavily to a paralysis of the moral and political will to take effective countermeasures.

What was true of British attitudes toward the amended poor law in general was also true of British reactions to the clearances. On the one hand, prior to the widespread availability of outdoor relief, British commentators invariably condemned the clearances and their perpetrators out of hand for driving the unrelieved rural poor into the country towns and port cities of Ireland. These 'sinks and cesspools of destitution', declared the Times in May 1847, 'are a creation of landlordism - the work of a class without social humanity, without legal obligation, without natural shame'. To some extent, moral outrage of this kind persisted in the midst of outdoor relief as clearances mushroomed under

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41 I.L.N., 4 March 1848.
43 Times, 13 January 1849.
44 I.L.N., 16 December 1848.
45 Times, 1 May 1847.
the spur of the Gregory clause and heavy poor rates. Mass evictions, such as the especially cruel ejectments on the Blake estate in County Galway, prompted the London News in April 1848 to declare sternly:

In November [1847] a coercion act was most properly passed through parliament to defend the Irish landlords from the murderous revenge of their exasperated tenants. Justice demands that with equal celerity a bill should now be passed to protect defenceless tenants from the equally murderous clearances of tyrannical landlords.46

The British response to the clearances, however, was by no means unambiguously disapproving. How could it be? One of the principal aims of the new poor law adopted in mid-1847 was, in the words of the Times, 'to compass indirectly the destruction of very small holdings and to convert the cottier, who is nicknamed a farmer and who starves on a cow's grass, into a labourer subsisting on competent wages'. If this aim could only be accomplished, the Times dared to hope, 'We shall also cease to witness the insane competition for land ..., degrading men to the appetite and food of beasts and peopling the land with a race savage, reckless, and irreconcilable'.47 Part of the theory of the amended poor law was that Irish landlords would spend a great deal of money giving large-scale employment to their former tenants as labourers in the improvement of their estates. And if they did not employ them, they would at least have to support them in or out of the workhouse. Thus the mere passage of the amended poor law had the potential to shift British attitudes about the clearances, and this is partly what happened. Before its passage, asserted the London News in December 1848, clearances were 'cruel and unjust in the extreme', but now, with outdoor relief widely available, 'we have no right, how great soever the apparent or real hardship may be, to find fault with the landlord'. Indeed, claimed this editorial writer with a breathtaking leap into unreality, ejectment in Ireland, 'which was horrible before the poor law came into operation, has now become harmless'.48

Repeatedly after 1847 attitudes that were much less critical of clearances, or even mildly approving, found a definite place in the British press. Alongside reports lifted from Irish newspapers that condemned evictions and their perpetrators in the harshest terms were other reports or editorials which palliated, excused, or justified landlord actions. A resigned tone of inevitability suffused an account in the London News in April 1849 about the impending clearance of 731 persons from Toomyvara in north Tipperary ('nearly the entire village'), which was part of the Massy-Dawson estate. The landlords, remarked the Lon-

46 I.L.N., 1 April 1848.
47 Times, 1 May 1847.
48 I.L.N., 16 December 1848.
The truth is that these evictions ... are not merely a legal but a natural process; and however much we may deplore the misery from which they spring, and which they so dreadfully aggravate, we cannot compel the Irish proprietors to continue in their miserable holdings the wretched swarms of people who pay no rent, and who prevent the improvement of property as long as they remain upon it.

Lastly, there was a growing readiness in Britain to accept that, given their precarious financial condition, many Irish proprietors simply could not afford the kind of costly estate improvements, such as thorough drainage, which might have enabled them to transform cottiers into wage labourers. Earlier, this point had been conceded only grudgingly, as in the sneering remark of the *Times* in May 1847 that ‘human drainage’ was ‘the only drainage an Irish landlord will ever think of doing at his own expense’. But later, at the end of 1848, the *London News* portrayed clearances and the consolidation of evicted holdings as ‘the easiest mode of improvement, and therefore,’ it said excusingly, ‘poor landlords are compelled to resort’ to them.

Even so humane an English politician and friend of the Irish poor as George Poulett Scrope, who had roundly denounced the Gregory clause before its adoption, was prepared to place the blame for the clearances elsewhere than on the landlords, whom he saw as generally acting under compulsion and out of an instinct for self-preservation:

It sounds very well to English ears to preach forbearance and generosity to the landowners. But it should be remembered that few of them have it in their power to be merciful or generous to their poorer tenantry ... They are themselves engaged in a life and death struggle with their credi-

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49 *I.L.N.*, 14 April 1849.
50 *I.L.N.*, 2 June 1849.
51 *I.L.N.*, 20 October 1849.
52 *Times*, 8 May 1847.
53 *I.L.N.*, 16 December 1848.
tors. Moreover, the greater number of the depopulators are mere agents for absent landlords or for the law-receivers under the courts acting for creditors ... Those landlords who have yet some voice in the management of their estates ... think themselves justified — most of them, indeed, are compelled by the overwhelming pressure of their own difficulties — to follow the example [of the receivers for estates under Court of Chancery jurisdiction].

Though Scrope considered it 'absurd' to blame 'a few [sic] reckless, bankrupt, wretched landlords', he did not hesitate to accuse the Russell government of the 'crime' of refusing to mitigate the 'ferocity' of the amended poor law. In strident language of which even the revolutionary nationalist John Mitchel would have approved, Scrope thundered that the government would 'be held responsible for it by history, by posterity — aye, and perhaps before long, by the retributive justice of God and the vengeance of a people infuriated by a barbarous oppression, and brought at last to bay by their destroyers'.

A similar verdict was rendered by a special correspondent of the London News whose articles in late 1849 and early 1850 sought to illustrate the heartless severities of the amended poor law, especially in relation to the clearances. With the Gregory clause particularly in mind, this correspondent declared bluntly:

The poor law, said to be for the relief of the people and the means of their salvation, was the instrument of their destruction. Calmly and quietly ... from Westminster itself, which is the centre of civilization, did the decree go forth which has made the temporary but terrible visitation of a potato rot the means of exterminating, through the slow process of disease and houseless starvation, nearly the half of the Irish [people].

Or, as this same correspondent put it succinctly and with brutal clarity in a later article, 'The system intended to relieve the poor, by making the landlords responsible for their welfare, has at once made it the interest and therefore the duty of the landlords to get rid of them'.

Thus for this writer and for many others in Britain, the Irish landlord, though to some extent the half-willing agent of irresistible forces and pressures, remained devoid of any redeeming features. At the end of his remarkable series of articles the London News correspondent characterised Irish landlords, 'speaking of them as a body and admitting many exceptions', as 'extremely selfish, ignorant, negligent, profligate, and reckless. To the serf-like people they have al-

54 I.L.N., 20 October 1849.
55 Ibid.
56 I.L.N., 15 December 1849.
57 I.L.N., 22 December 1849.
ways been more oppressors than protectors, and have thought of them only as sponges out of which they were to squeeze the utmost possible amount of rent, to squander on their own pleasures.58 That quintessential voice of the English middle classes, the Lancashire cotton manufacturer and Quaker John Bright, was equally disparaging of Irish landlords. Speaking at the Corn Exchange in Manchester in January 1850 on the need to remedy Irish popular grievances, he declared that Irish landed proprietors, with 'some brilliant exceptions', were 'for the most part ... beggared', 'almost universally despised, and to a large extent detested' - calculated remarks which, no doubt as he had expected, elicited loud cheers from his audience. The landlords, insisted Bright in phrases that by now were almost formulaic, 'very grossly neglected all the duties of their office and of their position'. Bright's severe stricures on landlords, of course, were not limited to those of Ireland, for in closing this address, he roundly asserted that 'the aristocracy of the United Kingdom has heaped evils unnumbered upon Ireland'.59 (Bright’s denunciation of the British and Irish ‘aristocracy’ at Manchester was part of the wider movement for what was called ‘free trade in land’ - a movement seeking changes in the law relating to landownership that would have eliminated certain legal privileges currently enjoyed by the landed elite of both countries.)

But did not the English middle classes have any complicity in the imposition of an amended poor law on Ireland in mid-1847? Surely they did. This had been reflected above all in middle-class determination to shift the financial burden of relieving Irish destitution onto the shoulders of Irish landed proprietors. The terms in which Irish landlords were discussed in parliament and in the British press clearly display the tell-tale features of scapegoating, and perhaps it is not fanciful to see in all this the displacement of British middle-class guilt. The shifting of the financial burden was accomplished under the Poor Law Amendment Act of June 1847 in the face of many protests and much evidence that Irish property could not bear this huge burden without bankrupting many landlords and causing the collapse or near-collapse of the poor-law system. Even after the dire consequences of the amended poor law became plain in Britain, there was no widespread disposition to reassume any substantial share of the costs of relieving the mass destitution associated with the famine. In March 1849, some eighteen months after any significant expenditure by the British government had ended, the London News proclaimed, ‘Great Britain cannot continue to throw her hard-won millions into the bottomless pit of Celtic pauperism’.60 This may safely be taken as the authentic or at least the dominant voice of the British middle classes. What has been called ‘donor fatigue’ manifested itself in Britain at a very early stage of the Great Famine.

58 I.L.N., 19 January 1850.
59 I.L.N., 12 January 1850.
60 I.L.N., 10 March 1849.
Admittedly, this was very far from the way in which the educated British public assessed the overall British contribution to the relief of an Ireland prostrated by famine. The common British view, well expressed by the London News in November 1848, was that 'in a time of commercial pressure and distress we have consented to enormous pecuniary sacrifices for the sake of Ireland and are ready to do so again if we can be assured that our bounty will not do harm rather than good to its recipients'. Coupling a grossly inflated claim with a threadbare excuse, the paper declared:

if Ireland has offered to the world the spectacle of a gigantic misery, England has also offered to the world the spectacle of an unparalleled effort to relieve and to remove it. If the splendour of our benevolence has not kept pace with the hideousness of her misery, it has not been from any want of inclination on the part of the living race of Englishmen, but from the sheer impossibility of remedying in one year the accumulated evils of ages, and of elevating the character of a people too poor and sorrow-stricken to attempt to elevate themselves.61

Here, in the slighting reference to 'the character' of the Irish people, we have a highly significant pointer to one of the principal explanations for the fact that donor fatigue displayed itself in Britain at such an early stage of the famine. If Britons were well along toward spending £10 million to relieve Irish starvation by the spring of 1847, without being able to see any signs of permanent improvement, the question arose as to whether the root of the problem was financial or – as seemed much more likely to most educated Britons – moral and 'racial' or cultural.62 What Britons confronted in Ireland, proclaimed the Times in March 1847, was 'a nation of beggars', and thus the challenge was enormous: 'We have to change the very nature of a people born and bred, from time immemorial, in inveterate indolence, improvidence, disorder, and consequent destitution'.63 England, claimed the paper, had been trying for years to eradicate or correct the worst features of the Celtic character – 'its inertness, its dependence on others, its repulsion of whatever is clean, comfortable, and civilized'.64 Irish Catholic priests, representatives of a religion despised by the Times, were

62 This issue of perceived racial differences requires careful handling. In the pages of Punch, as Professor Roy Foster has remarked, hostility to the British working classes or to the French could lead to the same kind of 'racialist' caricatures as hostility to Irish peasants and Irish nationalists. In addition, as Foster notes, 'Irish comic papers of a nationalist bent represented the English as grasping, prognathous, subhuman bogeymen'. See R.F. Foster, ‘Paddy and Mr Punch’ in Paddy and Mr Punch: Connections in Irish and English History (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1993), p. 192.
63 Times, 23 March 1847.
64 Times, 6 April 1847.
roundly chastised as a body because allegedly they never preached against 'that which is notoriously the crying evil of Ireland – its universal sloth'. It was not exactly all their own fault that the Irish people were in this lamentable condition. If Englishmen had been 'goaded by oppression and stupefied by neglect', declared the *Times*,

they would sit, like the Irish, with folded arms on the edge of subterranean or untried wealth, or in the face of anticipated but unrepelled famine; they would lounge, like the Irish, on the shore of a sea whose produce they never sought, and cumber the surface of a soil whose fertility they never cared to augment.  

In this situation, what was England’s duty, its mission? ‘We must educate and elevate Ireland’, insisted the *Times*, ‘by teaching her people to educate and elevate themselves.’ The paper pointed in self-satisfied fashion to all that the English people and government had already done for famine-stricken Ireland – as much as ‘the most exacting foe or the most jealous rival could have imposed on our submission or our conscience’. Even greater feats could be achieved by English charity ‘were it absolutely needful that England should take the work upon herself’. But such extreme generosity was neither necessary nor advisable while Ireland and the Irish, though not deficient in resources, displayed only ‘a crafty, a calculating, a covetous idleness’ and ‘a thorough repudiation of all self-exertion’. In the face of such deep-seated Irish moral incapacity, what could large additional amounts of British money really accomplish? This was the thrust of what to us must seem perhaps the most callous lines to appear in the pages of the *Times* in all of the famine years: ‘But what art, what policy, what wealth is cunning enough, wise enough, rich enough to assuage the moral evils and stay the moral disease of a vast population steeped in the congenial mire of voluntary indigence and speculating on the gains of a perpetual famine’. Even though this ‘voluntary indigence’ was considered extremely difficult to eradicate, the *Times* had urged the adoption of an amended poor law partly in the belief that it would ‘give to the peasant a right and a title which may at once insure his industry and his independence’. Since the diagnosis was horribly wrong, it is scarcely surprising that the prescribed course of treatment failed to yield the desired cure.

65 *Times*, 8 April 1847.
66 *Times*, 31 March 1847.
67 *Times*, 14 April 1847.
68 *Times*, 26 March 1847.
69 Ibid.
70 *Times*, 2 April 1847.
But if the amended Irish poor law disappointed British expectations in several critical respects, on balance its consequences probably satisfied most educated Britons. In April 1849 the *Times* distilled its results in a quite positive manner:

The rigorous administration of the poor law is destroying small holdings, reducing needy proprietors to utter insolvency, compelling them to surrender their estates into better hands, instigating an emigration far beyond any which a government could undertake, and so leaving the soil of Ireland open to industrial enterprise and the introduction of new capital.

Like many other Britons, this editorial writer was not at all blind to the huge accompanying social dislocation, but what mattered in the end was that the ground had apparently been cleared for a new agrarian era: 'We see Ireland depopulated, her villages razed to the ground, her landlords bankrupt – in a word, we see the hideous chasm prepared for the foundation of a future prosperity ...' 71 For some people in Britain a 'hideous chasm' was, however regrettably, the price which had to be paid for 'a future prosperity'.

71 *Times*, 2 April 1849.