

Thomas Chalmers and Irish poverty

PETER GRAY

In the wake of the implementation of the 1800 Act of Union many British (and some Irish) commentators continued to attribute the manifest problems of Irish governance and Irish socio-economic conditions to the 'incompleteness' of the Union itself. This developing awareness that legislative union alone could not address the underlying issues problematizing British-Irish relationships did not (in general) lead to any questioning of the logic of the constitutional tie, but often led to a demand for further integration – of institutions (including the executive and financial departments of the state), of the currencies and tariff barriers, and, rather more speculatively, of the moral and social condition of the Irish people with that of the population of Great Britain. This integrationist solution to the 'Irish difficulty' had particular appeal to Scots such as Joseph Hume, who regarded their own country's union with England in 1707 as source of its rapid social development, and hence the optimal model for Irish 'improvement'.¹

The fear that Irish difference posed a disruptive danger to the British body politic increased in the wake of 1815 with the challenges raised by the mass Catholic and Repeal campaigns led by Daniel O'Connell, and the economic crises most overtly demonstrated in the 1817 and 1822 famines and the outbreaks of agrarian violence that attracted outbursts of despairing sympathy and outraged horror respectively in the British reading public. All of these 'backward' Irish characteristics stoked growing alarm in the context of the growth of Irish labour migration (both seasonal and permanent) facilitated by the introduction of cheap steamship transit across the Irish Sea in the 1820s, and fuelled by Irish rural distress and the lure of industrial employment in Great Britain (and, some xenophobic commentators claimed, by the more favourable welfare provision available there).²

Thus in the decades between the Union and the Great Famine the phenomenon of Irish poverty – and indeed the perception of poverty as a defining characteristic of Irish society – acquired ever growing attention in Britain. This stimulated a plethora of developmental theories and a rather smaller number of policy initiatives, none of which (at least before the introduction of the Board of Works and the National Education Board in 1831) appeared to make much difference to the dete-

1 For Hume, see Peter Gray, "Ireland's last fetter struck off": the lord lieutenant debate 1800–67, in Terrence McDonough (ed.), *Was Ireland a colony? Economics, politics and culture in nineteenth-century Ireland* (Dublin, 2005), pp 87–101. 2 See, for example, John Ede, *Reflections on the employment, wages, and condition of the poor, showing the fallacy and injustice of recommending emigration as a remedy for the lamentable state of the English labourer, and tracing the evils of insufficient wages and ruinous poor's rates to their natural causes* (London, 1829).

riorating conditions of the Irish countryside. This preoccupation with poverty also, perhaps inevitably, focused attention on the question of institutional structures of poor relief and their applicability to Ireland, a country with no national poor law and only an unco-ordinated and underfunded network of public institutions for the alleviation of poverty, mostly in the form of medical charities.³

One dilemma confronting those considering the integration of Ireland into a 'British' welfare regime as a means of addressing the endemic and overflowing 'problem of poverty' was the absence of any single 'British' poor law. England and Wales, on one hand, and Scotland on the other, had separate national poor laws from the late sixteenth or early seventeenth centuries, but these had never been identical and had diverged further in both law and practice in the ensuing centuries. To complicate things further, by the early nineteenth century there were marked regional distinctions in relief practice within each of the two countries, and intense internal debates disputing both the nature and necessity of reform of their respective institutions. Campaigns for reform would lead to fundamental amendments of the 'old' English law in 1834 and of the 'old' Scottish law in 1845, but while there was some convergence, uniformity in welfare provision remained (and indeed remains) elusive.⁴

In retrospect it might appear inevitable that Ireland should have been granted a pared-down version of the workhouse-based new English poor law in 1838, but as late as 1836 this was far from clear. In the eyes of many theorists of union, Ireland's situation (and socio-economic backwardness) was cognate with that of Scotland in the aftermath of the 1707 Anglo-Scottish Union. This positive vision (surprisingly widespread both before and after the Famine) forecast a dynamic future for Ireland under the aegis of the Union, so long as backward-looking nationalists and agrarian secret societies were defeated (as the Scottish Jacobites had been in 1746), and obstacles impeding the dynamic potential of Irish economic growth (including overpopulation, endemic poverty and low expectations) were overcome. For many early nineteenth-century observers, the (largely voluntaristic) social institutions which had evolved in the poorer environment of Scotland, and apparently facilitated that country's remarkable economic growth since the mid-eighteenth century within the Union context, might be more easily transferable to Ireland than those of England, and assist in the necessary 'modernization' of the western island.⁵ This preference was shared by some commentators in Ulster, where some Scottish-style parochial bodies (albeit generally underfunded) were already in existence.⁶

This 'Caledonianization' strategy appealed to a number of English and Irish

³ The best introduction to the history of poor law and its predecessors is Virginia Crossman, *The poor law in Ireland 1838–1948* (Dublin, 2006). ⁴ For regional variation within England, see Steven A. King, *Poverty and welfare in England 1700–1850: a regional perspective* (Manchester, 2000); for Scotland, see Rosalind Mitchison, *The old poor law in Scotland: the experience of poverty, 1574–1845* (Edinburgh, 2000). ⁵ *The Scotsman*, 17 Mar. 1830. ⁶ See for example, [John Macausland], *A letter to the right hon. Lord Goderich, on the deplorable condition of the helpless poor in Ireland, with a plan of relief, as at present partly in operation in several districts of the province of Ulster. By a member of a parochial poor relief committee* (Dublin, 1827).

Unionist commentators, but not surprisingly its principal advocates were Scots. Chief among these was Thomas Chalmers. The son of a merchant family in small-town Fife, Chalmers emerged, after his 'conversion' of 1808, as the leading Presbyterian evangelical clergyman of his generation. Always confrontational and controversial, Chalmers had taken a strong line in 1827–9 in favour of Catholic emancipation (believing the abandonment of penal exclusion would actually strengthen both the Union and the Irish Church establishment by undercutting Catholic grievances). By 1830 he was also anxious to extend the 'purifying' experiment in poor relief he had pioneered in the Glasgow parish of St John's in 1819–23 to Ireland (as well as to the rest of Scotland and, gradually, also to England).⁷

Chalmers received an opportunity to promote his Scottish programme for Irish amelioration before the Spring Rice committee of inquiry into the state of the Irish poor in 1830. The growing volume of demands for an Irish poor law from both countries (from Irish liberal Catholics such as Bishop James Doyle as well as British labour-protectionists and radical philanthropists such as Thomas Sadler and George Poulett Scrope) had put pressure on both the administration and parliamentary opponents of such a measure to offer some concrete response. There is little evidence to suggest that the ministers in 1828–30 had any sympathy for such an initiative, and certainly Wellington as prime minister made his opposition explicit in the Lords in 1828 and again in 1830.⁸ Nevertheless, the most committed, and increasingly anxious, Irish opponents of any poor laws were becoming rattled. The liberal landowner and Co. Limerick MP Thomas Spring Rice had warned parliament in 1829 that even the public discussion of the matter was dangerous as it would raise unrealizable expectations in Ireland.⁹

There were precedents for such a manoeuvre. The select committees of 1804, 1822 and 1825, dominated by Irish landowners and 'experts' both on political economy and Irish conditions, had strongly recommended against any extension of poor laws to Ireland, and suggested alternative measures of improvement. Spring Rice, having been assured that the government would have no objection, moved in March 1830 that a new select committee of inquiry be formed to consider the state of the labouring poor in Ireland. Well aware that some might be sceptical as to the real purposes behind such a manoeuvre, he assured the house of his sincerity in seeking to elucidate and adjudicate between all opinions. At the same time, he took the opportunity to set out his own views: the distress of the poor in Ireland had been grossly exaggerated; they were, in fact, in a better position than the pauperized labourers of the south of England, and likely to advance further as Irish agriculture continued in its improving trajectory. Moreover, Ireland already had a magnificent

7 For Chalmers' life and ideas, see Stewart J. Brown, *Thomas Chalmers and the godly commonwealth in Scotland* (Oxford, 1982). 8 *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates*, 2nd ser., xix, cols 257–9 [1 May 1828]; xxiii, cols 367–8 [16 Mar. 1830]. 9 *Ibid.*, xxi, cols 1142–3 [7 May 1829]. Spring Rice's case against poor laws in both countries was rigidly Malthusian, although he made the case for assistance to the country through emigration and public works.

system of asylums and hospitals for the sick, destitute and insane, which were a tribute to the charitable character of the Irish gentry.¹⁰ For Spring Rice (also the leading parliamentary rebutter of O'Connell's repeal motion in 1834), the political assimilation of the two countries was imperative, but Ireland's backwardness rendered unacceptable any imitation of England's 'social constitution' manifest in its poor law.

Spring Rice sought to neutralize the demand for an Irish poor law based on the 'old' English model by ensuring his committee had a majority of rejectionists, and by giving a hearing to leading advocates of such a measure, including Bishop Doyle and the political economist J.R. McCulloch, while countering them with witnesses he was confident would effectively undermine them. One was the English moralist and poor law abolitionist J.E. Bicheno (who had recently completed a tour of Ireland and written up his observations as a popular book),¹¹ but the 'star' witness – then approaching the peak of his public influence in England as well as Ireland – was Thomas Chalmers. What Bicheno and Chalmers had in common was an evangelical Christian political economy that was grounded in Robert Malthus' pessimistic concern about lower-class immorality and fecundity, and scepticism about secular progress and human perfectibility.¹² Both located the fundamental cause of poverty and misery in the moral failings of the poor – their lack of foresight, self-help and sexual restraint – and in the indifference of the upper classes and the tendency of ill-designed institutions to encourage such attitudes (in England the poor law; in Ireland absenteeism and non-paternalist landlordism). Chalmers, moreover, had the additional authority garnered from having pioneered an experiment in voluntary poor relief, aimed at 'purifying' the traditional Scottish relief system from its subsequent accretions, in the Glasgow parish of St John's in 1819–23. Stewart Brown describes this as a determined attempt to recreate an ideal 'Godly Commonwealth' amid the social dislocation consequent on the rapid and unsettling industrialization and urbanization of the Scottish lowlands. It is clear, however, that Chalmers believed his Glaswegian model readily exportable to both Ireland and England.¹³

Chalmers' objectives in giving evidence to the committee were to justify the superiority of the traditional Scottish system of poor relief over its English rival (and to challenge the inroads the latter was starting to make in the practice of poor relief in the Scottish borders and cities), and to advocate his own perfection of the Scottish voluntarist approach in the St John's experiment. For Chalmers, the chief merit of the traditional Scottish system lay in its minimalism: 'the excellence of our system', he opined,

when compared with that of England, is altogether of a negative kind. Our parochial charity, from the extreme moderation of its allowances, does not

10 *Hansard*, 2nd ser., xxiii, cols 183–202 [11 Mar. 1830]. **11** J.E. Bicheno, *Ireland and its economy; being the result of observations made in a tour through the country in the autumn of 1829* (London, 1830). **12** For Chalmers and Christian political economy, see Boyd Hilton, *The age of atonement: the influence of evangelicalism on social and economic thought 1785–1865* (Oxford, 1988), pp 39–40, 55–70. **13** Brown, *Thomas Chalmers*, pp xiv–xv.

seduce our people from a due dependence on themselves, or to a neglect of their relative obligations[.]¹⁴

But its true superiority, and indeed universal applicability, resided in its close approximation to the providential natural laws of creation, which Chalmers, as an evangelical Christian political economist, was convinced had been divinely ordained for the regulation of human society. Whereas public relief to the sick, insane and incapable was legitimate and scripturally defensible, assistance to the able-bodied destitute (or indeed to the aged, to abandoned children and even to orphans) was not, and was likely to impede vital behavioural change by offering inducements to dependency, wantonness or immorality.

At St John's, he continued, the Scottish system had been further perfected through a total abandonment of charitable aid to the destitute (except for the sick and insane, and a dying remnant of 'old' parish paupers), and the introduction of a regime of moral inspection by the lay deacons of the parish who had distinguished the deserving from the undeserving poor and promoted self-help among the urban poor through advice and paternal moral care. The effect, he claimed (although this was regularly disputed by other observers) was a sharp fall in destitution and beggary as well as in parish expenditure on relief – allowing the transfer of resources to the more positive agencies of moral education and church extension.

The allegedly positive response of the Irish immigrants in the parish to this system, albeit founded on the established Church of Scotland infrastructure, had convinced Chalmers of its transferability; indeed the absence of any pre-existing and corrupting expectation of state relief in Ireland, and the lauded charity of the rural poor to each other, made this ideal. Contrariwise, the introduction of any compulsory assessment for the poor would be disastrous, creating the false expectation of a 'right' to relief, and impeding the necessary socio-economic transition to capitalist agriculture and industry that had been so successful in Scotland but still faced obstacles in Ireland. If such a transition in the absence of any compulsory poor relief might entail short-term suffering, this was preferable to the alternative of moral abasement, which must determine the socio-economic condition of a people. Chalmers rejected the environmental meliorism typical of many Whigs and radicals, and replaced it with an evangelical moralism:

The pervading fallacy in the speculations of those who advocate the establishment of a poor rate in Ireland ... is founded on the observation of a connection between a high state of character and a high state of economic comfort ... It is often conceived that comfort is the cause, and character is the effect; now I hold that character is the cause, and that comfort is the effect. ... [I]f instead of taking hold of the man, ... and attempting to elevate him by

¹⁴ *Second report of the select committee on the state of the poor in Ireland*, PP 1830 (654), vii. 451, p. 287.

the improvement of his economic condition, you take hold of the boy, and attempt to infuse into him another element, which I conceive to be the causal one, by means of education, then you will, through the medium of character, work out an improvement to his economic condition. What I should advise is, that education be made universal in Ireland, and that you should weather for a season the annoyance of Ireland's mendicity, and the annoyance of that pressure, which I conceive to be altogether temporary. This appears to me to be the only principle on which Ireland can be securely and effectually brought to a higher standard of enjoyment, and into the state of a well habited and well conditioned peasantry.¹⁵

Reconsidering this bleak short-term scenario, Chalmers later conceded that some temporary relief to immediate suffering through assisted emigration would be acceptable, but doubted that there was much demand for this, and demoted it from the role of panacea that some of its advocates claimed to that of a useful auxiliary to a developmental strategy based on moral rearmament rather than state intervention.

What impact did Chalmers' evidence have on Irish debates? While the Spring Rice report of 1830 declined to offer any positive recommendation on an Irish poor law, this very negativity in the face of the positive demands of Bishop Doyle and the English lobby was a de facto endorsement of Chalmers' insistence on voluntarism. It also whole-heartedly endorsed his insistence on the primacy of education, although in the highly contested Irish context it opted to recommend a national non-denominational system (subsequently enacted under Stanley in 1831) rather than that based on the Protestant church establishment which Chalmers preferred.¹⁶

Chalmers' evidence was also widely praised by enemies of an Irish poor law. The leading English political economist Nassau Senior urged the Scottish divine to publish it as a pamphlet, and incorporated Chalmers' evidence as an appendix to his own influential 1831 book on poor relief. Echoing the Scots divine, Senior identified the centrality of 'industry' and 'forethought' to social improvement and any real diminution of poverty; all human institutions should be judged according to their positive or (more frequently) negative impact upon these cardinal moral virtues. English and (as Chalmers had testified) recent Scottish experience had demonstrated the disastrous moral consequences of poor laws, threatening the very destruction of society if not summarily remedied. Only unmediated exposure to the direct consequences of immoral behaviour could produce behavioural improvement; universal experience 'in all ages and countries', Senior concluded, proved that 'idleness and improvidence can be prevented only by leaving them to the punishment inflicted by nature – want and degradation'.¹⁷ This became the standard 'orthodox' text on the

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 315. ¹⁶ *Report of the select committee on the state of the poor in Ireland*, PP 1830 (667), vii. 1, pp 55–7. ¹⁷ Nassau W. Senior, *A letter to Lord Howick on a legal provision for the*

question, and shaped the conclusions later reached by Senior's close friend (and former tutor) Richard Whately in his Irish poor inquiry report of 1836.

Chalmers' assertion of moral certainties, as well as the deferential treatment he had received at the hands of Spring Rice's committee, drew hostile commentary from James Doyle and other commentators. *Contra* Chalmers, Doyle insisted in his evidence that the great efforts the Irish poor made in supporting their destitute family and neighbours represented, not the epitome of charitable morality, but an index of endemic immiseration. It followed that, imperfect as it was, the introduction of the current English system would be preferable to the status quo: 'We have ... a disorganized population becoming by their poverty more and more immoral, and less and less capable of providing for themselves; and we have besides that, the frightful, and awful, and terrific exhibition of human life, wasted with a rapidity and to a degree such as is not witnessed in any civilized country upon the face of the earth.'¹⁸ Rather than offering an opportunity for the active remoralization of society through enlightened private agency, in his opinion the extremity of Irish poverty threatened social disintegration and the complete collapse of moral values into barbarism in the absence of any preventative interposition of public agency. This secular responsibility to provide a welfare entitlement was derived from the divine and natural law on which the legitimacy of any Christian state must be founded. The 'positive law of the gospel' directed that equity rather than equality be the objective of true statesmanship, but prudence indicated that this moral requirement could be met without the concession of unregulated and unlimited rights to the poor.¹⁹ The bishop argued that the governors and elites of Ireland, and not the poor themselves, were morally responsible for the visitation of divine providence manifest in endemic poverty. Atonement could come only from the acknowledgement of state responsibility and the adoption of appropriately penitent (and socially redemptive) policies.

Bishop Doyle entered the public lists again in March 1831, with his *Letter to Thomas Spring Rice*, intended as a rebuttal to the 'leading questions' which had been put to him the previous year, the contrary evidence presented to the committee, principally by Chalmers and Bicheno, and the anodyne conclusions which its chairman had penned.²⁰ The pamphlet repeated much of what Doyle had already argued, but with greater coherence and framed in yet more impassioned rhetoric. He identified nine core arguments against an Irish poor law manifest in the 1830 report, and proceeded to refute them. Doyle reiterated his fundamentally moralistic case, but added a more aggressive swipe at the 'selfishness, odious alike to God and man' of those who denied its necessity out of self-interest.²¹ The dogma that a poor law would drain investment capital from the wages fund he dismissed as simultaneously subverting the Gospel injunction to mercy, and ignoring the likely consequences of

Irish poor; commutation of tithes, and a provision for the Irish Roman Catholic clergy (London, 1831), p. 35. ¹⁸ *Second report of the select committee on the state of the poor in Ireland*, PP 1830 (654), vii. 451, p. 415. ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 454. ²⁰ James W. Doyle, *Letter to Thomas Spring Rice, esq., M.P., on the establishment of a legal provision for the Irish poor* (Dublin, 1831). ²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

the introduction of a genuine social security: 'a Poor Rate ... would give peace to the heart of the poor – it would attach them to the laws – it would give them an interest in the property of which they shared, and teach them, not by words, but by works, that there was a government which had care of them, and a country which they could call their own.'²²

His harshest criticisms were reserved for the hypocrisy of those who preached the moral superiority of private charity, while evading the requirements of effective relief. While refraining from mentioning Chalmers by name, Doyle denounced his doctrines and those who sought to hide behind them:

These men abet a system which is proved in evidence to send thousands prematurely out of life – the victims of famine – the prey of disease; but they are pious withal, and are anxious that no encroachment be made on that divine commandment to which is annexed the promise of 'a long life upon the earth.' They will take care that the child honour the father, that the child may live long; but they will, should he be reduced to poverty, leave him to the care of that Providence which feeds the sparrow on the house top. He may like the lily of the field be clothed better than Solomon, but if they see him naked they will not cover him: if he be poor and a wanderer they will not take him into their house: if he be an orphan they will not break their bread to him: nor wipe away the tear from the cheek of his widowed mother ... Yes! for the first duty of a statesman is to secure the necessaries of life to the bulk of the people committed to his care, and Christianity has no characteristic, unless it be that of those who profess it loving one another, and each of them doing to the other as he would have that other do unto him.²³

Most importantly, in his own eyes, Doyle refuted at length the argument that 'the poor have no claim founded on justice to a provision' at the expense of the properties.²⁴ He had, he declared, previously reined in his opinions on this matter so as to avoid exciting uncontrollable anger on the part of the dispossessed against those who continued to deny their moral entitlement. His patience had now snapped. Far from being absolute, the rights of property (albeit necessary) were rendered by Scripture and natural justice inferior to the right to life; the state which ignored this great fact brought social anarchy upon itself. In place of Chalmers' theological defence of the primacy of private charity, Doyle offered the opposite – a social-Catholic theological justification of state relief. This sat easily with a pointed rejection of the conventional economic notion of a necessary 'transition' in Ireland towards an Anglicized future –

²² *Ibid.*, p. 20. ²³ *Ibid.*, pp 34–6. This charge was unfair to Chalmers in at least one respect; the Scots divine distinguished between famine as a product of a 'special providence', distinct from the 'normal' poverty that arose from human sin, and he adopted an interventionist line during the Great Famine in 1847, see [Thomas Chalmers], 'Political economy of a famine', *North British Review* 7 (1847), 247–90; see also Hilton, *Age of atonement*, pp 108–14. ²⁴ Doyle, *Letter to Spring Rice*, p. 65.

a vision which he also thought based on an un-Christian pursuit of unrestricted capital accumulation that ignored the true interests of the people and must end in revolution and social convulsion. To avoid such a disaster he would 'adopt a sumptuary law, or a law of ostracism, or if not those laws, I would surely seek for a Poor Law, if for no other purpose, to check the progress of society on its "road to ruin"'.²⁵

This full-blooded reaction to Chalmers was not without public effect, not least among the more radical strand in British Whiggery associated with the *Morning Chronicle*, which asked, 'Who is there of the established clergy, either of England, Ireland, or Scotland, to compare with Dr Doyle? Compare his evidence on the Poor Law Committee with that of Dr Chalmers, and his superiority appears immense.'²⁶ The bitter exchanges of 1830-1, when combined with the escalating tithe war and renewed threat of regional famine in summer 1831, further polarized opinion in Ireland. For supporters of a poor law, Doyle's religiously-grounded and passionate advocacy now provided a new point of reference. One Dublin pamphleteer asserted that Doyle had convincingly proved Chalmers wrong on the crucial question of the entitlement of the poor.²⁷ Daniel Callaghan, the Catholic MP for Cork city, declared in 1832 that he had subsequently heard nothing 'that could shake his confidence in the opinion of the view he had heard delivered ... by Dr Doyle, that the 43rd of Elizabeth, which gave a system of Poor laws to England, was the Magna Charta of the poor'. Co. Wexford's Whig-liberal MP Henry Lambert agreed that 'Doyle had so fully exposed the cant and hypocrisy of the objection to Poor laws' as to make further objection impossible.²⁸ The Dublin-born imperial publicist Robert Montgomery Martin also cited Doyle at length in support of his case that a poor law was essential to give justice to both Ireland and England, and to preserve the empire by undercutting social unrest and the repeal movement it fuelled.²⁹

Chalmers may, however, have had the last laugh in this clerical duel. He eventually worked his evidence into his own 1832 book *On Political Economy*, a central text of evangelical economic thought and one which made a considerable (if not always acclaimed) impact on public opinion in Britain.³⁰ Paradoxically, however, his most important 'convert' on the poor-law question was in Ireland. Daniel O'Connell's attitude to poor laws was inconsistent and shaped by political calculation. In 1831 he had announced himself strongly persuaded by Doyle's case, but this adherence was not to last.³¹ Within a year he had found a rationale for re-adopting his underlying scepticism in Chalmers' writings. While opposed to Chalmers on questions of the Union and the church establishment, O'Connell as a paternalistic (and sincere)

25 Ibid., p. 60. 26 *Morning Chronicle*, 18 Jan. 1831. 27 Anon., *The desideratum, or Ireland's only remedy; 'poor laws and education', proved on social, political and Christian principles. Addressed to the citizens of Dublin.* By P.E.H. (Dublin, 1831). 28 *Hansard*, 3rd ser., xiii, cols 858-60 [19 June 1832]. 29 R. Montgomery Martin, *Poor laws for Ireland, a measure of justice to England; of humanity to the people of both islands; and of self-preservation for the empire* (London, 1833). 30 Brown, *Chalmers*, p. 192. 31 Daniel O'Connell to James Doyle, 29 Mar. 1831, cited in William John Fitzpatrick, *The life, times and correspondence of the right rev. Dr Doyle, bishop of Kildare and Leighlin* (new edn, 2 vols, Dublin, 1890), ii, 285-6.

Catholic evidently found inspiration in his idealization of the self-assistance of the working poor and emphasis on the moral responsibility of the gentry, and incorporated this into his own revived anti-poor law rhetoric.

In 1832 O'Connell proclaimed he would exert all his influence in Ireland to guard the people against the delusion that the people 'ought to rely upon the pockets of their more wealthy neighbours for support, instead of their own exertions'. Patient and minute investigation had now, he declared, disabused him of his earlier mistaken views, and convinced him that compulsory poor laws inevitably destroyed the morality of the poor, stoked class antagonisms, and distracted from the real means of improving the people. Rather than conveying natural rights, a poor law 'as implying slavery on the part of those who thus obtained relief under their provisions, was ... prejudicial to the independence of the national character'.³²

O'Connell admitted he had been bolstered in his scepticism by encountering Thomas Chalmers' moralistic voluntarism. When Chalmers visited London in July 1833, O'Connell made the effort to meet and thank him. '[He] shook me most cordially by the hands,' Chalmers wrote to his daughter, 'complimenting me on my evidence about the Irish Poor-Laws, saying he was a disciple of mine upon that subject, and not of his own priest, Dr Doyle.'³³ This was no empty gesture. O'Connell incorporated Chalmers' vision into his parliamentary rhetoric that year. While the economic consequences of poor laws were everywhere negative, he declared, it was their moral effects that posed the greatest dangers:

[H]e was satisfied that no laws could be devised better calculated to destroy the feelings of humanity in the breasts of the population than this system of Poor-laws. These feelings, he was happy to say, yet existed in Ireland. God had planted them deep in the hearts of the people; and the voice of revealed religion, at least told him that it was a duty to perform acts of charity – that if he expected to be rewarded hereafter, he must wipe away the tear from the eye of the widow and orphan – and that he must relieve those who were in affliction and distress.³⁴

Such an overt identification with the ideas of the Scottish evangelical drew harsh criticism even from sections of the O'Connellite press in Dublin.³⁵ It also, rather unusually, placed O'Connell into an alliance with the mouthpiece of the Irish Conservative landed interest, which also endorsed the morally and practically superior 'Scottish system', as most applicable to Ireland.³⁶ While O'Connell would again,

32 *Hansard*, 3rd ser., xiii, cols 853–6 [19 June 1832]. 33 Brown, *Chalmers*, pp 192–3.

34 *Hansard*, 3rd ser., xvii, cols 877–8 [2 May 1833]. 35 *Freeman's Journal*, 23 Mar. 1835.

36 Anon., 'The Scottish system of poor laws', *Dublin University Magazine*, 3 (May 1834), pp 508–22. Some Scottish commentators, however, criticized O'Connell for his apparent deviation from the Scottish model in excluding the aged poor from any entitlement to relief, *The Scotsman*, 2 Mar. 1833.

for tactical reasons, backpedal on the question in 1835–6, his fundamental opposition to an Irish poor law (which he admitted placed him at odds with most of the Catholic clergy and much of his party) helped mould the negative atmosphere into which the infant Irish poor law emerged after 1838.

Chalmers' direct influence on policy can also be traced in the report of the Irish Poor Inquiry Commission of 1836.³⁷ This widely-misunderstood document has been (in my view wrongly) seen as offering a constructive blueprint for Irish economic development. In fact, once stripped of the accretions inserted to keep dissentient Irish members of the Commission on board (but to which 'working commissioners' and their ministerial allies had no political commitment), this document too can be seen to be stamped with the ideas of Christian political economy. This was hardly surprising, given the fact that its chair, and moving spirit, was the Anglican archbishop of Dublin, Richard Whately, himself a propagandist for and dabbler in a form of political economy that (like Chalmers, although somewhat more 'optimistically') placed moral and behavioural change at the root of economic betterment.

At the heart of the 'Whately Report' (as it became known) was an explicit endorsement of the 'Scottish System' of poor relief for Ireland. By this Whately meant poor relief (except for the special categories of sick and insane poor) principally through voluntary agency and charity, with the state restricting itself mostly to a regulatory and instigatory role. The commissioners envisaged that any public aid necessary to support the system in the first instance would gradually be reduced as the improved system of voluntarism in Ireland took hold and the relief system came progressively more into line with the Scots ideal. The view of the majority of the commissioners was that:

although the system of providing for the poor by means of voluntary associations, aided by the public purse, and constructed upon well-digested principles, may not succeed at once in every part of the country – yet that, so far as it does succeed, it will tend to bring the population into a sound state with respect to the poor, and will we trust gradually work its way over the face of the island, and probably supersede in many places, as the Scottish system does so extensively, the necessity of a compulsory rate ... [for] although a compulsory rate might be rendered general more rapidly, and be administered by artificial means, it would every day become more difficult to manage, and tend to bring the country into a worse state than our inquiry has found it.³⁸

Appendix H of the report set out a plan for a network of voluntary agencies (not, however, restricted to the established church parochial structures as Chalmers

³⁷ *Third report of the commissioners for inquiring into the condition of the poorer classes in Ireland*, PP 1836 [43], xxx.1. ³⁸ George Nicholls, *A history of the Irish poor law in connexion with the condition of the people* (London, 1856), p. 150.

favoured, but aiming to draw on the same wellsprings of religious benevolence and calculated not to discourage less structured assistance of the poor for each other). It is also true that Whately personally put greater store in assisted emigration as a first step in addressing the perceived Malthusian malaise of Ireland and stressed this as his core auxiliary in the report, but this was not wholly out of line with Chalmers' evidence in 1830, which saw the thinning of the population as a desirable (although not essential) accompaniment to the necessary remoralization of social relationships.³⁹

As is well known, the Whig government in 1836 opted to reject the Whately report and instead commissioned George Nicholls to prepare a blueprint for the extension of a form of the amended English poor law to Ireland. The reasons for this decision lie outside the scope of this paper, although (among others) the view that a poor law should contribute to the governing strategy of 'justice to Ireland' in the later 1830s should not be discounted.⁴⁰ The Scottish model, with its marginalization of the state and emphasis on voluntarism, offered no place for the state (outside education and perhaps some assisted emigration) to play a role combining meliorism with the active brokering of social relationships. The English poor law offered a mechanism for doing both: the former through, as G.C. Lewis argued, facilitating economic transition, or, as others emphasized, coercing the landed class into investment and employment activity through the threat of heavy poor-rates to support the able-bodied destitute; the latter through the provision (however hedged in the 1838 legislation and restricted by the stress on less-eligibility) of a minimum entitlement to welfare provision on need (the state of destitution) rather than social category.⁴¹ It was this idea of a poor law, rather than the patently inadequate instalment on offer in 1838, that inclined many Irish and British radicals, including Smith O'Brien and Poulett Scrope, and liberal Catholic clergymen, such as the indefatigable Fr Thaddeus O'Malley, to support the measure rather than the alternatives of a Scottish-style model (still being pressed by Whately, Senior and their allies) or nothing at all.⁴²

Ironically, the Irish poor law debates sparked intense debate within Scotland itself over Chalmers' representation of the 'Scottish model' and the 'purified' form he had

³⁹ *Poor inquiry (Ireland). Appendix (H), Part I: containing reasons for recommending voluntary associations for the relief of the poor and reasons for dissenting from the principle of raising funds for the relief of the poor by the voluntary system, as recommended in the report*, PP 1836 [41], xxxiv. 643. Part 2 of this appendix comprised J.E. Bicheno's personal rationale for supporting the report, expressed in the language of evangelical Christian economics. ⁴⁰ See Peter Gray, *Famine, land and politics: British government and Irish society, 1843–1850* (Dublin, 1999), pp 31–5. The subject is dealt with at length in Peter Gray, *The making of the Irish poor law* (Manchester, 2009). ⁴¹ These ideas were most forcefully stated, albeit with different points of emphasis, in George Cornewall Lewis, *On local disturbances in Ireland; and on the Irish church question* (London, 1836), John Revans, *Evils of the state of Ireland: their causes and their remedy – A poor law* (2nd edn, London, 1837), and G. Poulett Scrope, *Plan of a poor-law for Ireland, with a review of the arguments for and against it* (2nd edn, London, 1834). ⁴² For O'Malley's radical development of Doyle's position, see Thaddeus O'Malley, *An idea of a poor law for Ireland* (2nd edn, London, 1837).

created at St John's. William Alison, professor of medicine at Edinburgh University, was at that time becoming engaged in a struggle for reform of the Scottish poor laws with the aim of granting a legal entitlement to the destitute poor and a more generous provision of relief, and soon crossed swords with Thomas Chalmers on the optimum mode of poor relief and the underlying question of the applicability of Malthusian doctrine to social policy.⁴³ In 1836 Alison made the case that the essence of 'justice to Ireland' should lie in a good poor law. In his opinion, Irish demographic history clearly proved that 'below a certain grade of poverty the [Malthusian] preventive check has no power'; in Ireland population had grown most rapidly in the poorest regions, whereas such an excess had been checked in England by the minimum entitlement existing under the law that had created the taste for 'artificial wants' that stimulated reproductive self-restraint. Chalmers' case for the moral and practical superiority of voluntary charity, which had previously proved so influential in Ireland, did not stand up to empirical scrutiny:

The idea that the sensibility of the rich to the miseries of the poor is weakened by a system of poor laws, is, a mere speculative delusion, the very reverse of the fact. The truth is, that when the poor are left, in a complex state of society, to voluntary charity, they are miserably neglected; great numbers of them sink into abject destitution; the rich have continually before their eyes examples of poverty and wretchedness, such as are almost unknown in a country where the poor are under the protection of the law; this sight gradually becomes habitual to them, they comfort themselves with the reflection, that many beggars are impostors; and too often 'indulge in unhallowed pleasantries in the sacred presence of misery'.⁴⁴

Such was now the case in Ireland, and would remain so, he concluded, if the Whately report was adopted. Ireland, like Scotland, needed only to grant a right to relief to the able-bodied poor within the workhouse (the infirm and helpless poor 'of good character' were best relieved in their own homes) to raise its standard of civilization and create the social security that would underpin rapid economic growth. The socio-economic crisis that engulfed Scotland in the early 1840s would see public support in Scotland shift from Chalmers to Alison and ultimately pave the way for the partial Anglicization of Scottish Poor Law in 1845 (although Chalmersian ideas of moral inspection and differentiation of the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' would long persist north of the border).

⁴³ For a summary of Alison's views on this, see his *Observations on the management of the poor in Scotland; and its effects on the health of the great towns* (2nd edn, Edinburgh, 1840), and Mitchison, *The old poor law in Scotland*, pp 173–5. ⁴⁴ [William P. Alison], 'Evils of the state of Ireland', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 40 (Oct. 1836), p. 503. See also [William P. Alison], 'Justice to Ireland – a poor law', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 40 (Dec. 1836), pp 812–31.

Despite the general defeat of the policy ideas espoused by Chalmers in both Ireland and Scotland, his arguments appear to have made a particular impact on one part of Ireland. Not surprisingly, this was in north-east Ulster. In 1837–8 many of Belfast's Presbyterian clerical and lay elite were strongly attached to the Chalmersian ideals of voluntary charity and moral improvement, and voiced these in protest meetings held to oppose the government's bill. The Revd R.J. Bryce, principal of Belfast Academy, quoted Chalmers extensively and praised the successful experiment in parochial voluntarism he had initiated at St John's, Glasgow. Whatever their differences on doctrinal matters, the leaders of the two principal wings of Irish Presbyterianism, Henry Cooke and Henry Montgomery, were agreed in vigorously upholding these localist and voluntarist principles and rejecting any centralized and compulsory measure. A list of extensive resolutions were agreed at a meeting in April 1837, with Cooke's preference for 'an optional Poor Law, of which they could [only] avail themselves in times of trial and scarcity' gaining majority support.⁴⁵ In 1838 a baronial assembly at Randalstown, Co. Antrim, passed resolutions deprecating the unnecessary costs of workhouse provision and urging an alternative of 'enabling the people to assess themselves at vestries, by parishes, half baronies, or such other unions as may be agreed on, for the support of our *Local Poor* alone'.⁴⁶ Similar points were made by local parochial meetings, such as that at Connor, Co. Antrim (where – in ideal Chalmersian form – the local 'Sabbath day collections' for food, seed and clothing were praised as already providing what was necessary by means of charitable relief).⁴⁷ The existing 'Scotch system' of voluntary relief in Ulster was lauded in parliament by Lord Castlereagh as a viable alternative to the government's scheme.⁴⁸ This was insufficient to prevent the passage of the 1838 bill, but helped form a negative attitude towards the consequent relief system in Ulster and shape the minimalist attitude towards working the law that was long to distinguish that province.

In conclusion, Thomas Chalmers' ideas of welfare (and the Scottish model they idealized) appear to have been comprehensively defeated. In this respect, at least, Ireland would follow an English rather than a Scots institutional model. But the ideas that morality was causally anterior to economic condition, and that voluntary assistance was ethically superior to state provision, were powerful ones, and continued to have some play in Ireland and in British thinking about Ireland long after 1838. Although Chalmers had rejected (and continued to oppose) the Irish poor law, his behaviourist preoccupations informed the thinking of many during the Famine (especially key figures such as Charles Trevelyan), who sought to turn the poor law from a social safety net into a machine for the moral transformation of the Irish (pauper and landowner alike) and the forcible promotion of self-help.⁴⁹ Chalmers'

45 *Belfast News-Letter*, 18 Apr. 1837. 46 *Belfast News-Letter*, 16 Feb. 1828; 27 Feb. 1838.

47 *Ibid.*, 27 Feb. 1838. 48 *Hansard*, 3rd ser., xlii, col. 718 [30 Apr. 1838]. 49 Trevelyan endorsed the evangelical reading of the situation, but tended (contrary to Chalmers himself) to see the continuing Irish crisis as more the consequence of a 'general' rather than a 'special' act of providence, see Gray, *Famine, land and politics*, pp 252, 286, and 'National humiliation and the Great Hunger: fast and famine in 1847', *Irish Historical Studies*, 32:126 (2000), pp 193–

ideas were regularly revived through the nineteenth century by many individuals – such as the poor law ‘crusaders’ of the 1860s–70s and the later Irish viceroy Earl Spencer – seeking to ratchet back what they saw as the slippage of the poor laws of the three kingdoms towards a more extensive form of welfare provision and the concession of welfare rights to the poor.⁵⁰ The shadow of Thomas Chalmers proved to be a long one, and even today – when neo-liberal social doctrine appears to favour voluntarist ‘faith-based initiatives’ over rights-based welfarism – it has not wholly dissipated.

216. ⁵⁰ See Elizabeth T. Hurren, *Protesting about pauperism: poverty, politics and poor relief in late-Victorian England, 1870–1900* (Woodbridge, 2007).