

# ‘The monster misery of Ireland’: landlord paternalism and the 1822 famine in the West

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This chapter examines the impact of the 1822 famine on the rural poor in the west of Ireland and the response of landowners as a social group to the crisis. It focuses in particular on the organization of relief in County Galway and the consequences of the calamity for tenants on a single landed estate in north Galway and south Roscommon. It also examines the importance of social stratification in the period, which, although less acute than later in the century, was an important factor in determining the distribution of charitable relief. The numbers of landless cottiers had risen steadily from the late eighteenth century, creating a cohort that was especially vulnerable to fluctuations in food supplies, and heavily dependent upon philanthropy for survival in times of need. Famine was caused by the partial failure of the potato harvest in August 1821 due to an unseasonably wet late summer, resulting in a drastically reduced potato crop, which began to run out in many areas in late April 1822. Throughout the crisis landowners, along with the clergy, acted as the facilitators of both government and private relief, which was premised on the basis that centralized aid supplemented local efforts at tackling distress.<sup>1</sup> Thus, the willingness of landowners to organize, fund and administer relief was the defining factor in the alleviation of both hunger and fever. In isolated districts, where landlord absenteeism was a major factor, extreme distress and actual deaths from starvation occurred on a significant scale. But this philanthropic impulse was not entirely selfless: some landlords and farmers seized the chance suddenly available to them to secure improvements to their holdings at no expense to themselves. The story of the 1822 Famine is one of both crisis and opportunity, and in which philanthropy served often contradictory purposes.

<sup>1</sup> Timothy P. O'Neill, 'Minor famines and famine relief in County Galway, 1815-25' in Gerard P. Moran (ed.), *Galway: history and society: interdisciplinary essays on the history of an Irish county* (Dublin, 1996), pp 445-85.

'THE ANGEL OF DESTRUCTION': THE 1822 FAMINE

The first reports of extreme distress emerged in mid-April as the annual supply of potatoes ran out in nine counties across the west.<sup>2</sup> The annual 'hungry months' of summer were often times of intense hardship for the landless who produced their own supply of potatoes in garden plots rented from farmers in return for labour. These were harvested in late August and were expected to provide sustenance for an entire family for a full year. This cottier class were largely outside the cash economy, exchanging their labour for right of residence on small plots of land, and were unable to purchase food when crops failed. Thus, even the partial failure of the crop was enough to plunge millions into extreme food shortage. The government was later informed by a parliamentary committee that had been appointed to investigate the state of the poor that:

the nature of the late distress in Ireland was peculiar . . . the potato crop which furnishes the general food of the peasantry had failed: but there was no want of food of another description for the want of support of human life. On the contrary the crops of grain had been far from deficient and the prices of corn and oatmeal very moderate.<sup>3</sup>

It was a lack of money, rather than the absolute lack of food, that created devastation. This factor was identified as an additional source of distress by the *Connaught Journal*, which pondered whether 'the abundance of provisions in neighbouring counties is but tantalizing them' [the starving poor].<sup>4</sup>

It was to the relatively privileged that responsibility for relief fell. Meetings of landowners and clergy commenced in the last week of April, with a typical meeting of gentlemen at Ennis organized 'for the purpose of taking into consideration the distressed and, indeed, actually starving state of the peasantry of that county'.<sup>5</sup> At the same meeting it was reported that the rural poor in outlying districts had been living on one meal per day for the previous month and that 'three fourths of the inhabitants are in absolute want of food and have neither means to purchase nor repay anything given to them by way of loan'.<sup>6</sup> During the same week similar meetings were held at Limerick, Galway and Castlebar with the price of potatoes reported to have risen to 8*d.* per stone in Galway, the equivalent of a full day's wage for an agricultural labourer in the west,<sup>7</sup> and potatoes which normally fetched less than 2*d.* per stone in Ennis were available for no less than 6*d.*<sup>8</sup>

On the west coast conditions were, as always, much more severe than elsewhere

2 Donegal was the sole western county where the potato crop was unaffected. There was a smaller than normal harvest reported in parts of Tipperary. 3 *Condition of the labouring poor in Ireland and application of funds for their employment: report from the select committee on the employment of the poor in Ireland, minutes of evidence and appendix*, p. 4. HC, 1823 (561), vol. 6, p. 331. 4 *Connaught Journal*, 24 Mar. 1823. 5 *Freeman's Journal*, 2 May 1822. 6 *Ibid.* 7 *Ibid.* 8 *Ibid.*, 3 May 1822.

and the *Connaught Journal* reported that on the Aran Islands people were being 'forced to sustain nature on limpets and such other shellfish as may be collected along the shore. If this is not poverty, if this is not the extreme of want, language has no meaning.'<sup>9</sup> In Galway town and west Galway, the *Galway Advertiser* reported:

The pawnbrokers are so full of the articles which the operative classes are in the habit of pledging and no purchasers to be found at the auctions for unredeemed goods, that no more money can be advanced on this description of property. We know many poor persons thus situated who, having no alternative, have absolutely sold their shirts and shifts and other cotton wearables as rags to the paper-stuff buyers for the purposes of stopping the ravages of hunger. Fever is very prevalent and many have died and some are buried without coffins. Numbers are dying from the worst of food, eating wild salt leafs, seaweed and shellfish. Several have drowned in endeavouring to obtain these fish and weeds.<sup>10</sup>

The *Mayo Constitution* regretted the 'awful and most melancholy duty of announcing the frequent visitation of death to the habitations of our unhappy fellow creatures, who have by the use of nettles and other weeds, for a while averted the blow until, in fact, their stomachs refused to receive this unnatural food'.<sup>11</sup>

#### COUNTY CENTRAL COMMITTEES

From the onset of the crisis there was a general belief that the famine was precipitated by the dire lack of full-time employment for the rural poor, and aggravated by absentee landownership. This factor left a very significant portion of the rural population dependent upon casual work, which was paid in kind rather than wages, leaving hundreds of thousands unable to purchase food.<sup>12</sup> A government committee was told in 1823 that 'they [the rural poor] are unaccustomed to have recourse to markets and indeed they seem rarely to have the means of purchasing'.<sup>13</sup> The Mayo Committee for the Relief of the Distressed Districts decried 'the drain of absent landed proprietors who draw from this impoverished county every year, a sum exceeding one hundred thousand pounds ... there appears to be an abundance of oatmeal and oats in this county, some hoarded up by speculators ... the people are starving in the midst of abundance'.<sup>14</sup> According to the *Connaught Journal*, the price of potatoes in the markets suggested that it was a shortage of employment and a lack of money in circulation rather than a general deficiency in the potato supply that

<sup>9</sup> *Connaught Journal*, quoted in the *Freeman's Journal*, 4 June 1822. <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 6 June 1822. <sup>11</sup> *Mayo Constitution*, quoted in the *Freeman's Journal*, 6 June 1822. <sup>12</sup> For editorials on the topic, see *Connaught Journal*, 24 Mar. 1823; *Roscommon and Leitrim Gazette*, 11 May 1822. <sup>13</sup> *Condition of the labouring poor*, p. 331. <sup>14</sup> Report of the Committee for the Relief of the Distressed Districts in Mayo, published in the *Freeman's Journal*, 25 May 1822.

were responsible for the pronounced distress in Galway.<sup>15</sup> The marquis of Lansdowne told parliament that in County Kerry 'the misery and starvation which the poor now suffer was endured in the face of plenty, but that plenty was beyond their means'.<sup>16</sup> Sir Edward O'Brien of Clare was the most prominent public representative to forcibly highlight the extent of the crisis, telling the House of Commons in early May that

a small portion of oatmeal, mingled with nettles or watercress was the daily allowance of food for many thousands of people in the south ... with thousands of able men about the country without the means of life, or the possibility of gaining a day's labour at the lowest possible price. They had no means of getting either money or money's worth to support them ... the destroying angel was already out.<sup>17</sup>

The *Mayo Constitution* claimed that while the entire population of the parish of Island-Eady were starving and without food and four people had already perished, 'hundreds of dying victims, are this instant awaiting their cruel fate with awful resignation ... the only persons of any consideration belonging to this parish are at present out of this country'.<sup>18</sup> While landlord absenteeism was highlighted as a major contributory factor to the crisis, some farmers also took advantage of the situation. The Committee for the Relief of the Distressed Districts in Cork noted that there were 4,500 people in a state of starvation in Skibbereen alone but farmers were no longer hiring casual labourers. The result was that many landless people were

gladly working for food without hire, or any provisions to take home to their wives and children, the consequence is that men, women and children are almost all naked and wander the country begging and almost starving, carrying and circulating contagion in all quarters.<sup>19</sup>

While a lack of money in circulation among the poor and want of employment aggravated by landlord absenteeism were consistently highlighted by commentators, landowners were centrally involved in the relief effort. The state's response to the crisis was centrally co-ordinated by a five-man Government Relief Board that operated alongside two main voluntary charitable organizations, the London Tavern Committee and the Dublin-based Mansion House Committee.<sup>20</sup> Throughout the crisis these three central bodies donated money and foodstuffs, which were, in turn, distributed by individual county central committees that co-ordinated aid distribution to baronial committees and parochial committees. The Government Relief

<sup>15</sup> *Connaught Journal*, quoted in the *Freeman's Journal*, 7 May 1822. <sup>16</sup> *Freeman's Journal*, 13 May 1822. <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 3 May 1822. <sup>18</sup> *Mayo Constitution*, quoted in the *Freeman's Journal*, 27 May 1822. <sup>19</sup> Report of the committee for the relief of the distressed districts in Cork, in *Freeman's Journal*, 30 May 1822. <sup>20</sup> The five members of the Government Relief Board were William Gregory, William Disney, Peter La Touche, Thomas Luscombe and George

Board held its first meeting on 13 May but their efforts were pre-empted by English philanthropy, which saw the London Tavern Committee, composed of London merchants, MPs and landowners, establish their own relief committee on 7 May, followed by a similar enterprise in Dublin organized at a public meeting called by the lord mayor in the Mansion House on 16 May.<sup>21</sup>

The immediate failure of Irish landowners to respond adequately to the crisis, in contrast to the speed and perceived generosity of the landowners and merchants who constituted the London Tavern Committee, was highlighted in newspaper editorials and speeches by prominent individuals. After the first meeting of the London Committee on 7 May, the *Globe* newspaper noted with alarm that 'there is no appearance of any intention to meet or subscribe in Dublin'.<sup>22</sup> English philanthropy was not confined to the London Committee and regional committees and fundraising events were organized across Britain throughout the month of May. Upwards of £500 was raised by a Manchester committee and £1,700 by a Liverpool committee in mid-May during the same week in which a 'grand dress ball' was held in the Great Room at the King's Theatre in London and a special comedy performance took place at Drury Lane Theatre. Similar fundraising events were reported across Britain by the *Worcester Journal*, the *Cambridge Chronicle*, the *Exeter Flying Post* and the *Edinburgh Star*, among others.<sup>23</sup> In relation to fundraising endeavours in England, Daniel O'Connell told the inaugural meeting of the Mansion House Committee that it was

in no small degree mortifying to national vanity, that they should have heard of subscriptions for the relief of the distressed peasantry in Ireland in London, Liverpool, Chester and other places, not only before meetings were convened, but before they were told an official account had reached Dublin of the extent of the crisis.<sup>24</sup>

At a meeting of gentlemen in Cork city on May 11, a speaker decried the:

utter abandonment of which the gentry of this country have been guilty, of all those obligations which their situation in life imposes on them ... It is with pain we add that this unfeeling apathy exists in this quarter to as great a degree as elsewhere ... the distresses of the poor are no more spoken of, except among the poor themselves, than if they were in the midst of plenty, and had the means of purchasing.<sup>25</sup>

Large private donations from prominent English institutions and individuals helped sustain the Irish relief effort with the Bank of England, the East India Company, the

Renny. <sup>21</sup> The London committee was officially titled the London Committee for the Relief of the Distressed Irish but was generally referred to as the London Tavern Committee. <sup>22</sup> *The Globe*, quoted in the *Freeman's Journal*, 9 May 1822. <sup>23</sup> *Freeman's Journal*, 20, 22 May 1822. <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 17 May 1822. <sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 14 May 1822.

duke of Devonshire and the officers of the 57th Regiment (then stationed in Galway) contributing a total of £2,400 for relief.<sup>26</sup> Large donations from the London Committee were channelled to leading church figures in the west with the Archbishop of Tuam, Charles Le Poer Trench, Revd Archdeacon Grace of Westport and Revd Smith of Castlebar dispersing £1,900 to local committees in the second week of May.<sup>27</sup> By the second week of June, only a number of weeks after the London Committee's establishment, a total of £40,265 of English aid was distributed throughout eleven counties.<sup>28</sup> In the first week of June, cargoes of seed potatoes sailed from Bristol and Liverpool, arriving at sixteen western ports. The London Committee donated a total of 2,961 tons of seed potatoes throughout the crisis.<sup>29</sup>

Throughout early May, county central committees were organized across the west and began co-ordinating relief to a series of baronial and parish committees in their respective counties. Relief in Galway was organized by two central committees: the Galway Committee for the Relief of the Poor, chaired by landowner William Martin Burke of Marblehill, and the Tuam Committee for the Relief of the Poor, chaired by Charles Le Poer Trench, archbishop of Tuam. The Central Relief Committee in Dublin stipulated that all money raised for relief was to aid local contributions and that gratuitous relief was to be avoided, with aid distributed through employment in public works. The government later concluded that

purely gratuitous relief can seldom in any case be given without considerable risk and inconvenience: but in Ireland where it is more particular, it is important to discourage habits of pauperism and indolence ... it is obvious that gratuitous relief can never be given without leading to the most mischievous consequences.<sup>30</sup>

Fifty-one landowners in County Galway were selected by a provisional sub-committee organized by the Central Relief Committee in Dublin representing the most prominent landed families in the county, including members of the Daly, Lambert, Trench, D'Arcy, Blake, Martin and Persse families.<sup>31</sup> The Galway Committee met daily in Loughrea and co-ordinated the activities of a number of baronial committees, which in turn organized the relief effort of parochial committees. Both Protestant and Catholic clergy were involved at a local level on parochial committees, with money used to provide provisions and seed potatoes at a reduced cost, with the proviso that they did not interfere with local markets. Small works were preferred to large schemes as it was hoped that this would encourage

**26** Printed Report of the London Committee for the Distressed Irish, printed in the *Freeman's Journal*, 13, 16, 24 May 1822. **27** *Ibid.*, 12 June 1822. **28** Report of the London Tavern Committee, p. 347, quoted in T.P. O'Neill, 'The famine of 1822' (MA, UCD, 1965), appendix, unpaginated. **29** Vessels landed potatoes at Sligo, Westport, Galway, Kílursh, Tarbert, Limerick, Castlemaine, Skibbereen, Tralee, Bearhaven, Crookhaven, Bantry, Kinsale and Cork. **30** *Condition of the labouring poor*, p. 331. **31** Printed resolution of the Galway Central Relief Committee, 16 June 1822, NLI, Bellew Papers, MS 27,273(5).

landowners to contribute, and in this respect the Mansion House Committee preferred parish committees to county committees, as smaller schemes avoided the scenario of large numbers of desperate people gathering at single schemes.<sup>32</sup>

The Tuam committee organized relief over a very large swathe of the county, consisting of ten baronies in both east and west Galway and from June onwards met four times a week – twice weekly in Tuam and twice weekly in Galway town.<sup>33</sup> A quorum of five members was deemed necessary to conduct committee business and applications for relief from baronial committees could only be made at central committee meetings with applicants expected to produce returns noting the numbers of persons relieved by their endeavours, expenses incurred, the quantity and quality of provisions provided and the amount and value of subscriptions received.<sup>34</sup> Baronial committees were requested to approach local Catholic priests, ‘along with one other respectable parishioner’, and visit the homes of the distressed in order to compile accurate statistics of the number of those in dire need.<sup>35</sup> They were subsequently allocated resources to alleviate the crisis in their own districts on the original stipulation that the central committee allocate one half of the money with members of the baronial committee allocating the remainder. For labourers on relief schemes, the Galway Committee fixed the quantity of daily sustenance at one quart of meal to each head of family and one pint of meal to each subsequent family member, with those in need of relief but unable to secure a place on a relief scheme receiving one pint per family member.<sup>36</sup> In view of the extreme nature of the crisis, the Galway Central Committee wrote to all baronial committees to advise them not to refuse relief to labourers solely on that basis that they possessed a single cow or horse, which ordinarily could be sold to provide sustenance and to be particularly mindful of the needs of the under-tenants of non-resident landlords.<sup>37</sup>

As well as aid sent directly to county central committees, the government appointed three senior engineers, Alexander Nimmo, Richard Griffith and John Killally, to supervise the setting up of public schemes to provide employment and food to the starving. Griffith supervised public works in Limerick, Cork and Kerry and spent a total of £17,043; Nimmo supervised works in Galway, Mayo, Leitrim, Sligo and Roscommon, spending £26,893; and Killally supervised road works totalling £14,725 in County Clare and south Galway.<sup>38</sup> In Galway, as elsewhere, priests and ministers were prominent on local committees, with schemes generally overseen by leading members of the county’s most prominent gentry families who supervised the spending of £12,953 on thirty government-sponsored projects.<sup>39</sup> Various members of the extended Blake, D’Arcy and Daly families, traditionally

**32** O’Neill, ‘The 1822 famine’, p. 32. **33** Printed resolutions of the Tuam Relief Committee 1822, NLI, MS 27/274. **34** *Ibid.* **35** *Ibid.*, 16 June 1822 (MS 27,273/5).

**36** *Ibid.*, 15 July 1822 (MS 27,273/6). **37** *Ibid.*, 2 July 1822 (MS 27,273/5). **38** *Employment of the poor in Ireland: copies of the reports made to the Irish government by the civil engineers employed during the late scarcity in superintending the public works, account of appropriation of sums expended to provide employment for Irish poor.* HC 1822 (249), 10, p. 437. **39** *Ibid.*, pp 44–6.

among the county's most prominent landed families, acted as principal overseers on eight schemes, with Archbishop Charles Le Poer Trench personally overseeing eight schemes and Lord Clonbrock overseeing three.<sup>40</sup>

Along with direct government grants county central committees co-ordinated the distribution of large amounts of direct grants of money and provisions donated by the government and the London and Dublin committees. A total of £87,953 was dispersed for relief during the crisis in Galway with the government granting £48,663, the London Tavern Committee donating £31,357 and the Mansion House Committee £3,230.<sup>41</sup> Despite the London Committee's proviso that they would only distribute funds to individual counties on the basis of matching charitable contributions raised locally for relief, only £4,703 was disbursed from private sources in County Galway. In addition to money, the London Committee also landed cargoes of 715 tons of potatoes, 226 tons of meal, 29 tons of rice and 55 tons of biscuits in County Galway alone.

#### PAROCHIAL RELIEF SCHEMES AND ESTATE MANAGEMENT

It is instructive to examine the impact of the 1822 crisis on the inhabitants of a single landed estate and the degree to which the crisis affected the various groups of employees and tenants who constituted a single community. The property of absentee landlord Ross Mahon consisted of two main portions, with several thousand acres situated in north-east Galway, in the parish of Ahascragh and surrounding districts, and a smaller portion comprising less than a thousand acres situated in south Roscommon, in the parish of Tarmonbarry.<sup>42</sup> As previously discussed, absenteeism was repeatedly singled out as an exacerbating factor during the crisis and the managerial arrangements on the estate were typical of most estates of a similar size with a highly stratified chain of command responsible for day-to-day management. The employment of a hierarchical managerial system involving stewards, agents and head agents acting under the direction of a head landlord, facilitated both the physical and psychological detachment of Ross Mahon from the life of his tenants and employees. On the Tarmonbarry portion of the estate, steward Christopher Quinn reported to land agent Alexander Wallace, who in turn carried out the wishes of head agent Thomas Bermingham, who corresponded weekly with Ross Mahon in Dublin. Similarly, on the Galway portions of the estate, steward Timothy Glynn acted under instruction from agent Henry Comyns, who was directed by Ross Mahon's brother James, who also relied on head agent Thomas Bermingham for the overall supervision of the estate.<sup>43</sup> In such circumstances, the implementation of crucial decisions regarding evictions and rent were heavily influenced by the opinions of stewards and sub-agents, who often disagreed with, or were antagonistic toward one another. The

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44. <sup>41</sup> Quoted in O'Neill, 'The 1822 famine', appendix, unpaginated. <sup>42</sup> See Conor McNamara, *The Mahon Papers: Manuscript Collection List 149*, NLI. <sup>43</sup> Bermingham was also head agent on the neighbouring Clonbrock estate.



detrimental role of absentee landlordism was specifically highlighted at a meeting of the 'principal parishioners' of Tarmonbarry at the height of the crisis in a resolution condemning local landlords. The meeting noted that 'due to the general failure of the potato crop, an alarming scarcity has taken place, so much so, as to threaten an immediate famine and its usual concomitant disease, but also to extend those calamities to the ensuing year from the inability of the poor to crop their land'.<sup>44</sup> The gathering pointed out that there were nearly 400 families in the parish suffering under 'the severe pressure of actual death' and 'that from the non-residence of any landlord or person of property in the parish, we have to regret our inability to raise any sum at all adequate to meet the necessity of the poor on the present occasion'.<sup>45</sup>

By the early months of 1822, even before the annual potato supply began to run out, the tenants on the estate presented a frightening appearance. A number of tenants were without clothing or food, prompting land agent Henry Comyns to write to Ross Mahon:

I gave some old blankets and rugs to the widow Nicholas Flannery . . . it was as great an object of compassion as could be seen, it was clearly clothing the naked, she is in a wretched way for want of clothing and want of food, these days herself and her children will starve for want of clothing, [the rugs] will be sufficient, to take her out to beg with them.<sup>46</sup>

In May Christopher Quinn, steward on the Tarmonbarry estate, risked his livelihood by writing to Mahon and asking him to provide assistance to his tenants, claiming:

the voice of humanity calls on me to represent to you the wretched state of this part of the country, few so badly off as those on your estate, eleven or twelve families only excepting, not only from the general calamity but also from the loss of their potatoes by floods.<sup>47</sup>

In June the London Tavern Committee donated £169 for the poor of the parish of Ahascragh to be administered by Ross, James and George Mahon, along with £50 to the people of the parish of Tarmonbarry, with the money remitted to Mahon's agent, Alexander Wallace.<sup>48</sup> By the end of July, a total of £348 had been donated for the relief of the poor of the parish of Ahascragh, with the London Tavern Committee's contribution of £169, supplemented with £30 from the archbishop of Tuam, £30 from the Dublin Mansion House Committee and £119 donated by local subscribers.<sup>49</sup> There were significant differences of opinion between the agents, stewards and members of the Mahon family over how the money should be distributed

<sup>44</sup> Resolution of the principal parishioners and clergy of the parish of Tarmonbarry, 3 June 1822, NLI, Mahon Papers, MS 47,844/1. <sup>45</sup> Ibid. <sup>46</sup> Henry Comyns to Ross Mahon, 3 Nov. 1822, NLI, MS 47,843/3-5. <sup>47</sup> Christopher Quinn to Ross Mahon, 21 May 1822, NLI, MS 47,843/8. <sup>48</sup> Correspondence of the Committee for the Relief of the Distressed Irish, NLI, MS 47,843/7. <sup>49</sup> Ibid.

despite the London Committee's official recommendation that all remittances go towards the purchase of provisions and seed potatoes. Such differences of opinion, combined with a multiplicity of agents and stewards and the absence of the head landlord, slowed the process of organizing relief and was detrimental to a co-ordinated response on the estate. George Mahon, who was involved in running the Galway portion of the estate on behalf of his brother Ross, was in favour of using the relief money to promote a new manufacturing enterprise by investing in and distributing wool in its un-manufactured state so that the wives and daughters of tenants might spin woollen yarn, which in turn could be woven into flannel. He argued that such a scheme would keep their tenants' dependents busy all year round, and independent of the seasonal nature of farm work. He argued that under his scheme 600 families in the parish could eventually become self-sufficient.<sup>50</sup> Alexander Wallace, however, proposed that the money be distributed through relief schemes only, which would have recipients working on road repairs on the estate.<sup>51</sup> He subsequently rebuked his employer, telling him: 'in the past, too much indulgence may heretofore have rather injured rather than served your tenantry – a little is now absolutely necessary'.<sup>52</sup> Christopher Quinn, on the other hand, advised Mahon against such a scheme, as 'it would not in the smallest degree alleviate the wants of your tenantry'. Complaining of the actions of head agent Thomas Bermingham, Quinn drew his employer's attention to the dire want of potato seed in the locality and advocated the purchase of same for distribution.<sup>53</sup>

The Mahon estate eventually received funds from the Tuam Central Committee to set up a relief scheme on the estate and £257 was finally spent on the employment of starving tenants in drainage work on the Ahascragh portion of the estate; 255 destitute families were eventually employed on these works, with land agent Henry Comyns noting that 42 tenant families were without any means of sustenance whatsoever.<sup>54</sup> At the beginning of June there were a total of 390 men, women and children in immediate want of food in the small Tarmonbarry district with this number increasing to 540 by the end of the month.<sup>55</sup> The crisis was compounded by the dire lack of seed potatoes as the poor were forced to eat their entire crop and could not afford to purchase more for sowing. On the insistence of the parish priest, the Tarmonbarry Relief Committee distributed oatmeal to starving families engaged in digging drains on the Roscommon portion of the estate, with tenants given two quarts of meal per day, per head of family. Of the 72 heads of families who came forward from the Mahon estate in Tarmonbarry, only 17 were accepted on the working party. Noting that the tenants were without fuel, Christopher Quinn proposed the employment of tenants draining bogs on the estate and, as the tenants

<sup>50</sup> George Mahon to Ross Mahon, 19 Aug. 1822, NLI, MS 47,843/6. <sup>51</sup> Alexander Wallace to Ross Mahon, Aug. 1822, NLI, MS 47,843/9. <sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 28 Nov. 1821, NLI, MS 47,843/2. <sup>53</sup> Christopher Quinn to Ross Mahon, 31 May 1822, NLI, MS 47,843/8. <sup>54</sup> Note on relief on the Ahascragh portion of the Mahon estate, NLI, MS 47,844/3. <sup>55</sup> Returns of destitute families on the Mahon estate, 1822, NLI, MS 47,845/11.

did not have turbary rights, he suggested to Ross Mahon that a donation of £5 would enable them to purchase turf and potatoes.<sup>56</sup>

With the end of the European Wars in 1815 grain prices in Ireland dropped dramatically and with large profits no longer available from tillage farming, landowners increasingly turned to pastoral farming to maintain the high profit margins that had driven up the price of rents over the previous two decades.<sup>57</sup> The increasing determination of Irish landowners to maintain the high incomes generated by the boom in agricultural prices generated during the Napoleonic Wars steeled many landlords against the pleas of the rural poor to refrain from the wholesale clearance of large numbers of their landless tenants during the first half of the nineteenth century.<sup>58</sup> However, the modernization of the agricultural economy demanded a fundamental structural transformation of rural society as a whole, entailing a steady decline in the demand and role of the landless labouring class, an increasing diminution of the role of middlemen and a mounting preference on the part of landowners for clearances, farm amalgamation and field consolidation.<sup>59</sup> As Samuel Clark has observed, landowners during the period were especially anxious to dislodge squatters who occupied land without official permission and frequently without paying rent.<sup>60</sup> Pastoral farming was also increasingly attractive to landowners, as it required a far smaller investment in casual and full-time labour and generated reliable annual profits from a vast export market.<sup>61</sup> With eviction clearly in mind on the north Galway portion of his estate, Mahon's land agent compiled a return of 71 destitute tenants, renting holdings that were in arrears to the extent of £515 in June 1823. Of this group of tenants, George Mahon noted that 2 heads of families were dead, 10 families were beggars, 19 were insolvent, 21 were 'to be discharged' and 11 families were labelled 'gone away'.<sup>62</sup> The rental returns highlight the fluidity between the landless cottiers on the estate who rented tiny plots of land in return for their labour and very small tenants who paid cash for their plots, supplemented by casual days worked for the landlord and deducted from their rent. Thus, too precise a distinction between the landless and those tenants occupying tiny plots of land in return for cash and labour is misleading. Destitution was concentrated within the lowest class of tenants, with 29 insolvent tenants paying less than £1 in rent per half year, 13 paid less than £2, 16 paid less than £3 and 5 less than £5. Destitute tenants

<sup>56</sup> Christopher Quinn to Ross Mahon, 26 June 1822, NLI, MS 47,843/8. <sup>57</sup> For an overview of the commercialization of the rural economy during this period, see Raymond D. Crotty, *Irish agricultural production, its volume and structure* (Cork, 1966), pp 35–46; James S. Donnelly, Jr, *The land and the people of nineteenth century Cork* (London and Boston, 1975), pp 9–73; Cormac Ó Gráda, *Ireland before and after the Famine: explorations in economic history, 1800–1925* (Manchester, 1988), pp 1–35; L.M. Cullen, *An economic history of Ireland since 1660* (London, 1987), pp 100–33. <sup>58</sup> Cullen, *An economic history*, p. 100. <sup>59</sup> See Donnelly, *Land and people*, pp 9–14. <sup>60</sup> Samuel Clark, *Social origins of the Irish Land War* (New Jersey, 1979), p. 31. <sup>61</sup> See Crotty, *Irish agricultural production*, pp 35–46. <sup>62</sup> In addition to these numbers, two tenants were listed as blind and four more as unable or too old to pay. Returns of tenants listed as insolvent, dead and gone away, 1819–22 at Ahascragh (NLI, MS 47,845/5).

were overwhelmingly between two to three years behind in their rents, reflecting the previous two years' bad harvests, and highlighting the amount of debt which their landlord was willing to indulge. Larger debts by small tenants on the estate present a misleading overall picture of this group's inability to pay rent as they were accrued by two distinct groups of people. First, relatively large debts were accrued on tiny plots where the holder had died, fled or was too old or unable to work. Thus, John Donnelan, who was listed as dead, previously paid a half yearly rent of only £1 17s. but had debts totalling £11 12s. listed against his name. Likewise, Malachy Flannery was listed as 'gone way' and paid only 16s. per half year, but had debts of £12 3s. listed against him. The townland of Lunaghton had one single arrears of £56 owed by a group of tenants for conacre, presumably representing the combined debts of a significant group of landless cottiers and small tenants for garden plots. Thus, the vast majority of debt on the estate represented very small sums owed by a significant number of very poor tenants. A very small but financially significant number of large and middling farmers, however, were also unable to pay their rents. James Hughes represented a much more comfortable class of strong farmer but owed £111 12s. from a half yearly rent of £41 4s. Of the 67 other tenants listed as destitute, however, (the status of 3 tenants is unclear) only 5 paid more than £5 half yearly rent.

It was clear to George Mahon that these debts could not be met by his tenants and he recommended to his brother that he discharge the unpaid rents entirely from his rental account and transfer them to an account of bad debts, as 'it is as well to enter them in this way as to keep them on the books, giving a fictitious debt which probably can never be realized or reconciled.'<sup>63</sup> A similar pattern of debt emerged on the Roscommon portion of the estate, where the land agent had previously categorized 22 tenants as 'good tenants', 5 as 'middling' and 10 as 'indifferent', with only 9 tenants listed as 'bad' in May 1819 (9 tenants had no comment).<sup>64</sup> However, despite only 10 tenants being listed as 'bad', Mahon served eviction notices on all 55 Roscommon tenants, along with 14 sub-tenants in October 1825.<sup>65</sup> In anticipation of also being evicted, tenants on the Clooncannon portion of the Galway estate petitioned their landlord in an undated memorial:

Pray pity your poor people who always did and always will pay their rents well, better drown us then turn us off, for there is no place for us anywhere. We were a quiet easy poor people who did never complain . . . but what is that to us if we be turned off, if we will pay you more than anybody and more work than anybody and why would you destroy us, that all the Fathers that came before you took care of us and for all their sakes God Bless you and keep your poor people about who would die for you and leave us where you found us and God prosper you.<sup>66</sup>

**63** Galway rental, dated Nov. 1822, NLI, MS 47,845/9. **64** Arrears of rent for the period Nov. 1818 to May 1819 on the Mahon Estate, NLI, MS 47,845/2. **65** List of the tenants served with eviction notices at Tarmonbarry, 29–31 Oct. 1825, NLI, MS 47,846/4. **66** Petition from the tenants of Clooncannon to Ross Mahon, NLI, MS 47,846/3.

The arrival of a bumper harvest in August 1822 did not signal an end to distress in the west, however, and food shortage remained a serious and recurring phenomenon. Nakedness among the poorest rural classes remained a problem of particular concern, with the *Connaught Journal* claiming in February 1823 that it was 'tormented with letters, long and short, on the subject'.<sup>67</sup> 1824 was to be a year of intense hardship once again, with the same newspaper scolding Galway landowners for their failure to provide employment for the landless: 'Shame on some of our resident Gentry who have their tenantry in a state of starvation, without making some exertion to have them usefully employed.'<sup>68</sup> The paper noted ruefully, 'we have received a letter from a respectable Catholic clergyman, dated Ballynahinch, Cunnemara, [sic] June 6th, which contains the following dreadful announcement: "One-fourth of the inhabitants of this parish are starving. I pledge myself to you, that they are worse than in 1822."<sup>69</sup> As the Mahon estate demonstrates, in a rural economy where the difference between eviction and staying on the land was often a debt of £3 or less, casual labour saved many families from complete destitution and on the small Cornamucklagh portion of the Mahon estate, 18 tenants and their families were engaged in some form of casual work for their landlord during 1825.<sup>70</sup> Men were paid a standard rate of 8*d.* per day (the average in the west at this time): this was also the price of one stone of potatoes during the crisis of 1822, with children being paid 4*d.*, and the hire of a tenant's horse earning an additional 2*d.* per day. Thus, the value of one day's work, from sun up until sun down, by one head of family, could be exhausted in one day's food. Between 17 January and 23 October 1825, 18 tenants and their families earned a total of £55 18*s.* through their combined labour in the townland, undoubtedly saving many of these families from complete destitution and eviction, highlighting the pitiful monetary rewards the poor were willing to accept to stave off catastrophe. Such work was prized and much sought after despite being so badly rewarded and 13 heads of households among this group of 18 families worked for their landlord for an average of 75 days per year, with one tenant working 209 days, three working between 100 and 150 days, with the remainder confined to seasonal work of between 23 and 95 days.

#### CONCLUSION

The culpability of landowners in the unremitting decimation of the lowest social group in rural Ireland, the landless labourers of the west, throughout the nineteenth century has contributed to the enduring disdain with which landlords have been held in the Irish popular psyche. While the role of the small and middling classes of farmers in the economic exploitation of the landless tends to be overlooked in both

<sup>67</sup> *Connaught Journal*, 3 Feb. 1823. <sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 16 June 1824. <sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 10 June 1824.

<sup>70</sup> Return of labourers compiled by Charles Filgate at Cornamucklagh, Oct. 1825, NLI, MS 47,824.

popular folklore and nationalist rhetoric, the memory of famine clearances by landlords retains the power to evoke genuine emotion in the modern Irish imagination.<sup>71</sup> Contemporary observers of pre-Famine rural Ireland, however, consistently highlighted the necessity for reforming the rural economy and the failure of the Irish landowning elite to modernize their estates was a source of constant criticism from both agricultural improvers and political economists alike. Contemplating the nature of estate management in the west on the eve of the Great Famine in 1844, English agricultural improver John Wiggins noted in his study of the Irish land tenure system, *The monster misery of Ireland*:

One cannot at first behold the wretched and filthy habitations, the inadequate outbuildings, the ragged habiliments, the poor food, the miserable fences, the total neglect of draining, the crops smothered with weeds, and the thousand other indications of poverty, without a feeling of conviction that there is something wrong, indeed that much, very much, is very wrong between landlord and tenant.<sup>72</sup>

English, rather than Irish, philanthropy, combined with government aid, was primarily responsible for saving many thousands of lives during the famine of 1822 and the London Tavern Committee, as well as being the first to formulate a coherent response to the crisis, was by far the most important private donor of aid. Out of a total of £606,973 expended by various agencies on relief during the crisis, the London Committee contributed £280,140, compared to £221,437 expended by the government, with private relief amounting to £85,355 and the Mansion House Committee's efforts raising £20,044.<sup>73</sup> In addition to money, the committee donated 2,961 tons of potatoes, 1,762 tons of meal, 471 tons of rice and 273 tons of biscuits.<sup>74</sup> As the spectre of famine receded, the Revd Dr Oliver Kelly, archbishop of Tuam wrote to the committee: 'it is not in the power of language to convey an overstated idea of the mass of misery under which these wretched beings laboured when the bounty and munificence of your committee first enabled me to visit them with your relief.'<sup>75</sup> Walter Joyce, chairman of the Grand Jury of the town of Galway, wrote that as a result of the committee's efforts 'prejudices have been softened, new ties of union and concord have been cemented, and Ireland, disclaiming all foreign relations, has learned to look to her natural protectors in the hour of our adversity'.<sup>76</sup>

Ostensibly, the organization of relief in the west was relatively sophisticated and

<sup>71</sup> For a report on a commemoration of the Ballinlass evictions of 1846 at Newbridge, County Galway in May 2011, see *Tuam Herald*, 26 May 2011. <sup>72</sup> John Wiggins, *The monster misery of Ireland: a practical treatise on the relation of landlord and tenant with suggestions for legislative measures and the management of landed property, the result of over thirty years experience and study of the subject* (London, 1844), p. 23. <sup>73</sup> Quoted in O'Neill, 'The 1822 famine', appendix, unpaginated. <sup>74</sup> *Ibid.* <sup>75</sup> *Report of the committee for the relief of the distressed districts in Ireland, appointed at a general meeting held at the city of London tavern, on the 7th May, 1822*, p. 168. <sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 175.

was ultimately effective, in terms of keeping tens of thousands of people alive and distributing a vast amount of food daily. However, while the achievements of the central relief committees were not insignificant, a number of issues must be considered when assessing the role of landlords who dominated county, baronial and parish committees. These committees acted primarily as facilitators of government and charitable relief, rather than generators of relief, and the vast majority of aid disbursed among the poor originated from direct grants of cash and provisions, provided by the government and the London Tavern Committee, and, to a much lesser extent, the Mansion House Committee. Throughout the crisis, in districts where landlord absenteeism was a major factor, reports of deaths, while shocking, remained haphazard and occasional, consisting predominantly of accounts from individual travellers, newspaper reporters and clergy, as relief efforts were hampered by the absence of formal relief structures. Mass evictions were not a prominent feature of the crisis, however, as events over the preceding years on the Mahon estate demonstrated. During subsequent partial harvest failures (which failed to arouse significant British or national interest) the limits to landlord philanthropy were more evident and despite the prevalence of external relief, debts accrued during the 1822 crisis were not purged, and could spell disaster for poor families.

Relief schemes enabled landowners to have private improvements carried out across their estates, typically in drainage and road maintenance, at no added expense to themselves other than the task of supervising schemes that increased the value of their property. Thus, rather than paying their labourers 8*d.* per day, many landowners could simply let their labourers go and administer food and provisions to the value of 6*d.* to 8*d.* per day, provided to a significant degree by English landowners. There was also serious criticism of the government's public works schemes from one of the government's own engineering experts. Alexander Nimmo supervised road works across all five counties in Connacht and expressed concern to the government that the practice of setting labourers' wages on schemes directly against their landlords' rent de-incentivized labourers and led to corruption by overseers, who were generally landowners themselves, and who were subsequently disinterested in the quality of work carried out.<sup>77</sup> Small schemes such as road repairs and the cleaning out of drains accounted for most of the work done. However, engineers were frequently dissatisfied with the quality of labour carried out by relief claimants, noting in one report: 'the custom of jobbing is so invertbred, [sic] that we could seldom get the work properly done by day labourers for the sum granted by presentment. The peasantry are not trained in those habits of industry, which are always the result of regular industry.'<sup>78</sup>

<sup>77</sup> *Employment of the poor in Ireland*, p. 437. <sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.