

# Historicising the Famine: John Mitchel and the Prophetic Voice of Swift

ROBERT MAHONY

In mid-March 1847, while the Great Famine was taking its catastrophic course in Ireland, the newly-formed Irish Confederation issued the first in its series of historical publications, a two-penny pamphlet titled *Irish Political Economy*. Given the date of its appearance and its provenance in a young organization of advanced nationalists, this pamphlet would be expected to concern itself with the ongoing disaster in rural Ireland. Hence it is curious that the work should consist of three discussions of Irish conditions dating from the first half of the eighteenth century: Jonathan Swift's *Proposal for the Universal Use of Irish Manufacture* (1720), his *Short View of the State of Ireland* (1728), and excerpts from *The Querist* by George Berkeley, which dated from 1735. Both Swift and Berkeley, the bishop of Cloyne in Swift's day, had long been regarded as ancestors of Irish patriotism, although Berkeley somewhat less than Swift, whose works were also more easily available.

The three pieces were introduced with a short preface by John Mitchel, a leading light (and often a leader-writer) in *The Nation* newspaper after Thomas Davis's death. Mitchel was a moving spirit in the withdrawal of Young Irelanders from Daniel O'Connell's Repeal Association in 1846 and their forming the rival Confederation in early 1847; but he was also well aware that such political disputes resembled, in Theodore Hoppen's words, 'a hermetic drama in which the participants and the issues remained almost entirely divorced from the realities of starvation and death.'<sup>1</sup> Indeed, in a letter to William Smith O'Brien, of 19 March 1847 – only four days after the *Political Economy* pamphlet appeared with his preface – Mitchel considered the likelihood of an impending general election and bleakly dismissed parliamentary politics, even agitation for repeal of the Union, as delusive. For he contended that in only a matter of months, and certainly in advance of any election, 'it will be manifest to everybody that the material existence of the Irish people is the thing now at stake – and the mere raising of our political position will be able to excite no great enthusiasm, unless it be made irresistibly obvious that the one object includes the other.'<sup>2</sup> That last clause contained no hint of any optimism on Mitchel's part about the efficacy of the Repeal movement either to ameliorate the effects of the Famine or to mobilize the Irish population to renewed agitation on account of it. Rather, the

1 T.K. Hoppen, *Ireland Since 1800: Conflict and Conformity* (London, 1989), p. 29.

2 Quoted by William Dillon, *Life of John Mitchel* (2 vols., London, 1888), i, p. 156.

reference to the 'irresistibly obvious' was a swipe at O'Connell, whose final letter, read to the Repeal Association in mid-February 1847, noted:

it will not be until after the deaths of hundreds of thousands, that the regret will arise [i.e. within the British parliament] that more was not done to save a sinking nation.

How different would the scene be if we had our own Parliament – taking care of our own people – of our own resources. But alas! alas! it is scarcely permitted to think of these, the only sure preventatives of misery, and the only sure instruments of Irish prosperity.<sup>3</sup>

To Mitchel, O'Connell had failed to make the connection between Repeal and the Famine 'irresistibly obvious' to the suffering Irish poor – whose inevitably short-term interest in survival rendered O'Connell's style of political action irrelevant. If Mitchel could imply such a dismissal of O'Connell, what relevance could he possibly have seen in reprinting works by Swift and Berkeley, written over a century earlier and thus without any immediate connection at all to the contemporary catastrophe?

Mitchel's 'Preface' to *Irish Political Economy*, however, explicitly connects national survival with the necessity of Irish autonomy, providing thereby a theoretical context for the new Irish Confederation's treatment of the Famine, which, however disastrous, had been only tangential to the recent founding of the Confederation. The Young Ireland seceders had broken with the main body of O'Connell's Repeal Association over issues of both substance and style. In terms of substance, they were not willing to accept O'Connell's disavowal of physical force as a means of achieving separation, nor his own willingness occasionally to cooperate with the Liberal government, or, perhaps more precisely, to attempt to persuade that government to take effective measures to ameliorate the effects of the Famine. Stylistically, they were uncomfortable with the overtly Catholic tone of the Association, concerned that it might alienate landowners and middle-class Protestants potentially of good will toward the objective of Repeal. The Irish Confederation they formed was to have a more pluralist tone, and was more sympathetic to Irish landlords' complaints about the extension of the Poor Law to Ireland (since this, in accord with Liberal ideology, would place the financial responsibility for the relief of the Irish poor on the shoulders of the Irish gentry), although on the question of physical force the Confederation was eventually to tack toward the O'Connellite position.<sup>4</sup> In keeping with its more

3 O'Connell to T.M. Ray, 13 February 1847, *The Nation*, 20 February 1847, p.318. Mitchel quoted this passage in *The Last Conquest of Ireland (Perhaps)* [first published 1859; and in the Irish American Library, vol. iv: *The Crusade of the Period and Last Conquest of Ireland (perhaps)*] (New York, 1873), p. 232.

4 See Richard Davis, *The Young Ireland Movement* (Dublin, 1987), esp. chapters 3-5.

pluralist aims, and its roots in Young Ireland and the programme of *The Nation* newspaper, one of the purposes of the Confederation's own educational programme was to show that Repeal was a modern manifestation of the Irish separatist tradition dominated in the past by Irish Protestants and to which their descendants might be drawn. Confederate clubs were often named for historical Protestant patriots, and pamphlets like *Irish Political Economy*, reprinting Swift and Berkeley, illustrated the tradition of Protestant nationalism.

Like *The Nation* itself, then, the Confederation's purpose included historicizing nationalism. But Mitchel's inclusion of Swift's *Short View* in particular had a starker object as well, historicizing the Famine by implicating it in a longstanding strategy of English control of Ireland. As Mitchel had noted in establishing a Confederate Club in Dublin, named for Swift, the Confederation was intended to show 'how we should re-conquer this country from England'.<sup>5</sup> The goal of reconquest obviously went beyond mere repeal of the Union; indeed in the circumstances of the Famine a reconquest seemed necessary if the 'material existence of the Irish people' was to be secured against the designs of the British government. Demonstrating the longevity of those designs, and that, however natural the potato blight, the fact of the Famine was a direct result of British domination, was Mitchel's ultimate purpose in invoking Swift's complaints dating from 1728. For as Mitchel noted in his preface, 'the warnings, advice and remonstrances, which were addressed to our ancestors one hundred and twenty years ago, suit our condition exactly to this day.'<sup>6</sup>

What appealed to Mitchel about Swift's 'warnings, advice and remonstrances' in the *Short View* was that these were prompted in 1727 by the Dean's general despondency about Irish conditions, rather than by such topical (and by 1847, much dated) concerns as the Wood's Halfpence affair which had occasioned the more famous *Drapier's Letters*. In the *Short View* Swift begins with a list of fourteen features of geography, economics and politics that 'are the true Causes of any Countries flourishing and growing rich', and then examines 'what effects arise from these Causes in the Kingdom of Ireland'.<sup>7</sup> Such causes include the fertility of the soil and the presence of good natural harbours, which Ireland possesses, but also an industrious population, a habit of agricultural improvement and economic self-reliance, lacking in Ireland 'not altogether owing to our own Fault, but to a Million of Discouragements'.<sup>8</sup> Even more tellingly, what brings about prosperity in any normal country is also self-government, a chief administrator in constant residence, the restriction of political office to natives, and the spending of both public revenues and privately-received rents and profits within the country. All of these necessary conditions of national

5 Quoted by Davis, p. 136.

6 John Mitchel (ed.), *Irish Political Economy* (Dublin, 1847), pp. iii-iv.

7 *Swift's Irish Pamphlets*, ed. Joseph McMinn (Gerrards Cross, 1991), p. 107.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 109

prosperity are denied to Ireland by virtue of English dominion. England meets all Swift's conditions for national prosperity, but actually precludes their operating in Ireland; indeed, English prosperity is increased by its receiving revenues and rents from Ireland while denying Irish products entry to English markets. While Swift criticizes the Irish who prefer to consume or wear foreign-produced goods, his criticism of English economic and political domination, although covert, is nonetheless obvious, and with it the unspoken remedy, Ireland's freedom from such domination.

Mitchel was attracted, then, by Swift's long since having identified England as responsible for Irish misery on account of a determined policy of governing Ireland in English interests. The dovetailing of his own views with Swift's was recognized in the review of the pamphlet including Swift's *Short View* which soon appeared in *The Nation*. For Swift's contentions, the reviewer noted, have an 'extraordinary applicability ... to our present wants and defects, show[ing] how little of political advancement has taken place here for the last one hundred years. What Swift wrote ... is a perfect picture of our present condition.'<sup>9</sup> Indeed, Swift's picture of peasant life in 1727 was astonishingly similar to contemporary facts: 'The miserable Dress and Dyet, and Dwelling of the People. The general Desolation in most parts of the Kingdom ... the Families of Farmers, who pay great Rents, living in Filth and Nastiness upon Buttermilk and Potatoes, without a Shoe or Stocking to their feet; or a House so convenient as an *English Hog-sty*, to receive them', a picture he regards as perhaps 'comfortable sights to an *English Spectator*'.<sup>10</sup>

The *Short View* in fact had acquired for Swift a certain reputation as a prophet, for well before Mitchel or his reviewer it had been cited as a picture that had not changed over the years. It was discounted, to be sure, by the Earl of Orrery, Swift's sometime friend, when in 1752 he produced his captious *Remarks on the Life and Writings of Swift*, frequently adopting a dismissive tone toward Swift's patriotic writings. Of the *Short view*, he maintained, 'I need take little notice, since the present state of *Ireland* is, in general, as flourishing as possible.'<sup>11</sup> Responding to Orrery, Swift's cousin and enthusiastic defender, Deane Swift, waxed indignant: 'I am sorry, that any man whose whole fortune ... is reported to be in *Ireland*, should be so great a stranger to the groans and miseries of that unfortunate kingdom. But what I chiefly wonder at is, that any man ... could possible reside for the greater part of eighteen years in *Ireland* without remarking to his infinite regret that no people in the *Christian* world are so destitute of raiment, food and all the conveniences of life, as are the inhabitants of that wretched kingdom.'<sup>12</sup>

9 *The Nation*, 27 March 1847, p. 394.

10 *Swift's Irish Pamphlets*, pp. 111-12.

11 Earl of Orrery, *Remarks* (London, 1752), p. 199.

12 Deane Swift, *Essay upon ... Swift* (London, 1755), pp. 199-200.

In the century between Swift's death and the appearance of Mitchel's pamphlet, the *Short View* became something of a touchstone for Swift's patriotism among Catholic commentators. There were, in fact, not so many of these; Swift's patriotic legacy was most often invoked over that century by Irish Protestants, who tended to prefer the rhetorically more memorable *Drapier's Letters*. But for Catholics, the *Short View* was more telling: where Swift as the Drapier was speaking to a particular historical incident, aggravating enough at the time but later needing its context explained, as the 'short viewer' he seemed to be describing a state of affairs essentially unchanged. English markets were long since open to Irish goods, but the other deficiencies under which Ireland laboured in 1728 for the most part remained, and the condition of the people, if not so generally abjectly destitute, was often enough as Swift had described it. While the *Drapier's Letters* reflected the urban perspective of the Protestant middle class in Swift's day, furthermore, the perspective of the *Short View* was broader, hence more rural, and, although Swift does not say so, more directly appropriate to the Catholic peasantry. Thus, when the historical controversialist Dennis Taaffe, a now-and-again Catholic, hailed Swift's patriotism in his *Impartial History of Ireland* in 1811, he gave the Drapier one-ninth the space devoted to the *Short View*.<sup>13</sup> And the certainly Catholic Francis Mahony, writing as 'Fr. Prout' in *Fraser's Magazine* in 1834, celebrated Swift in general and the *Short View* in particular, citing it as 'evidence that the wretched peasantry at that time was at just the same stage of civilization and comfort as they are at the present day; for we find the Dean thus describing a state of things which none but an Irish landlord could read without blushing for human nature.'<sup>14</sup> Perhaps with the British Tory readership of *Fraser's* in mind, however, Mahony refrains from quoting the *Short View* at length, so veiling its implication that responsibility for the state of rural Ireland lay more with English policy than with Irish landlords.

Blaming Irish landlords, of course, formed no part of the Irish Confederation's programme in 1847. Mitchel's 'Preface' to the first Confederation propaganda pamphlet indeed notes that Irish exports of grain and cattle were proceeding even as the Famine raged, implying his own preference for prohibiting exports as the means to relieve it. Overtly, however, he places the responsibility for Irish starvation squarely on the denial of Irish self-government, since advocating a different commercial policy in the absence of an Irish parliament would be fruitless. And although his including in the pamphlet Swift's *Proposal for the Universal Use of Irish Manufactures* and selections from Berkeley's *Querist* imputes his own endorsement of both authors' promotion of Irish self-sufficiency, the immediate relevance of either work to the desperate situation of Ireland in 1847

13 Denis Taaffe, *An Impartial History of Ireland from the Period of the English Invasion to the Present Time* (4 vols., Dublin, 1809-11) iv, pp. 20, 21-30.

14 Francis Mahony, 'Dean Swift's Madness: A Tale of a Churn' in *Fraser's magazine*, x (July 1834), pp. 27-28.

was not obvious, but had to be constructed. Hence they were introduced with Swift's *Short View*, which pictured a rural devastation that had hardly changed at all in the century and more since Swift's time, outlining the enduring premises for Ireland's catastrophe and holding intentional English policy to account for them. The acceptance of such political premises, implicitly, must underpin progress toward Irish economic self-sufficiency.

The significance of Mitchel's reprinting Swift's *Short View* in 1847 extends, then, well beyond its fitting the Irish Confederation's programme of appealing to contemporary Protestants by invoking their patriotic ancestors, and avoiding direct criticism of landlords. For re-presenting the *Short View* contextualized the Famine not in the blunders or accidents of then-current British policy, but as the latest manifestation of a long-established policy of privileging English commercial and political interests over Ireland's in every instance, even if this resulted in the utter annihilation of Ireland. In terms of Mitchel's personal rhetorical proclivities, this is a softer version of what he explicated outright in America a decade later in a series of letters to Congressman Alexander Stephens of Georgia (later the Vice president of the Confederate States of America), originally appearing in Mitchel's *Southern Citizen* in 1858 and soon republished in book form as *The Last Conquest of Ireland (Perhaps)*. This is Mitchel's account of the failure of the Repeal movement, culminating in the abortive Rising of 1848, a failure in which the Famine operates, even more directly than it is cast in the Preface to *Irish Political Economy*, as an instrument of British policy, a devastating tactic in its own right. It is the last, as Mitchel's title indicates, of a catalogue of conquests. Like Swift's *Short View*, Mitchel's book explains how a country much favoured by nature could be prostrated by policy; how

an island which is said to be an integral part of the richest empire on the globe – and the most fertile part of that empire ... should in five years lose two and a half millions of its people (more than one-fourth) by hunger, and fever the consequence of hunger, and flight beyond sea to escape from hunger, – while that empire of which it is said to be a part, was all the while advancing in wealth, prosperity, and comfort, at a faster pace than ever before.<sup>15</sup>

A second significance of Mitchel's reprinting Swift in 1847 is not without an ironic twist. For as the *Short View* evidenced Swift's sympathy for the Catholic peasantry, and thereby became the document Catholics preferred to invoke when celebrating Swift's patriotism, so Mitchel's making use of it can be seen as his aligning himself with that aspect of the Swift tradition. Like the eighteenth-century Dean of St Patrick's, but much more forthrightly and forcefully, he

<sup>15</sup> Mitchel, *Last Conquest* (1873), p. 94.

adopted the cause of the native Catholic population of Ireland. And like Swift as well, his motivation was not love of country, but hatred of its condition; whether Mitchel understood this of Swift we do not know, but in a letter of 1857 he recognised of himself:

whatever it was that made me act and write as I did in Ireland, ... there was perhaps less of love in it than of hate – less of filial affection to my country than of scornful impatience at the thought that I had the misfortune ... to be born in a country which suffered itself to be oppressed and humiliated by another; less devotion to truth and justice than raging wrath against cant and insolence.<sup>16</sup>

Indeed, in Mitchel's time and later he was often compared to Swift, particularly for his talents of invective and irony. It is the *more* ironic, then, that in Mitchel's *History of Ireland* in 1869 he should have attacked Swift bitterly as an insincere patriot. For although Swift had promoted the use of Irish manufactures, he had not made a forthright and sustained argument for national independence; although he was 'well enough aware ... of the growing misery and destitution of the common people',<sup>17</sup> he never spoke out against the Penal Laws against Catholics; and while the Ireland of Swift's day offered a great catalogue of degradations at English hands, what moved him most memorably was a patent for Irish copper coinage that the English government had awarded to the Englishman William Wood. Rarely even in his lifetime, when personal enemies abounded, was Swift so vilified as at the hands of John Mitchel.

The reason for Mitchel's change of heart toward Swift lies, I think, in that self-revelation of his own patriotic motives as so similar to Swift's. In 1847 Mitchel had aligned himself in the Catholic tradition of regarding Swift as a patriotic prophet; ten years later he admitted that what prompted him to serve Ireland was more hatred at its humiliation than any love of country. By 1869 he was blaming Swift, it would seem, for not progressing so far in his patriotism as Mitchel himself had; for not inveighing against England, explicitly and repeatedly, as the source of Ireland's humiliation. To imply as much, as Swift had done in the *Short View*, had been sufficient validation of Swift's patriotism for Mitchel in 1847, but for Mitchel by 1869 it was no longer enough. Whereas Swift had served as a model of Protestant patriotism for over a century after his death, Mitchel could perceive in his own career, only five years before he was to die himself, a model that far outpaced the old Dean of St Patrick's, and to which, however anachronistically, he could blame Swift for not measuring up.

16 Mitchel to Fr. John Kenyon, c. 1858, quoted in Dillon, *Life of John Mitchel*, ii, p. 104.

17 John Mitchel, *The History of Ireland from the Treaty of Limerick to the Present Time* (2 vols., Dublin, 1869), ii, p. 75.