

The making of mid-Victorian Ireland? Political economy and the memory of the Great Famine

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The Ireland of the 1850s and 1860s has been periodised variously by historians as 'post-Famine' or 'mid-Victorian'.¹ The distinction is one loaded with historiographical controversy. While one chronological tag stresses the lasting significance of the catastrophic prelude and implies that it continued to cast a profound shadow over the following decades, the other tends to normalise Irish experience in these years as a regional variant of British mid-Victorianism.² Lying behind the latter is a tendency to read the Famine as a phenomenon that was essentially restricted and transitory in its impact. Negatively affecting the poorer rural classes (especially in the west) through destitution, excess mortality and mass emigration, it is taken to have strengthened the position of the remaining 'strong' farmers, consolidating them into a rural bourgeoisie competing vigorously with the landowners for the profits of the land. Simultaneous with this social rationalisation, the mid-Victorian economic boom is argued to have lifted all classes in rural Ireland (especially the working farmers) to unprecedented levels of prosperity. It took a 'revolution of rising expectations' consequent on the sudden collapse of the boom in the later 1870s to again plunge the Irish countryside into turmoil. The Famine's legacy, it follows, played a relatively small role in the lives of the majority of survivors, once having created the preconditions for their physical betterment.³ This thesis has, of course, its critics, who stress regional and class variations of post-Famine experience, and question whether the bulk of Irish farmers made more than marginal and unstable gains in the 1850s–60s.⁴

It is not the intention of this essay to examine the economic-historical debates underlying this controversy. Rather, it considers the contestations of

¹ See, for example, James O'Shea, *Priest, Politics and Society in Post-Famine Ireland* (Dublin, 1983); W.E. Vaughan, *Landlords and Tenants in Mid-Victorian Ireland* (Oxford, 1994). ² For the argument that 'post-famine Ireland is also mid-Victorian Ireland', and a period characterised more by continuity and anglicisation than disruption and antagonism, see R.V. Comerford, 'Ireland 1850–70: post-famine and mid-Victorian', in W.E. Vaughan (ed.), *An New History of Ireland. V: Ireland under the Union, i, 1801–70* (Oxford, 1989), pp. 372–95. ³ A summary of this interpretation can be found in W.E. Vaughan, *Landlords and Tenants in Ireland, 1848–1904* (Dublin, 1984). ⁴ See Cormac Ó Gráda, *Ireland Before and After the Famine: Explorations in Economic History, 1800–1925* (Manchester, 1988), pp. 128–52; K. Theodore Hoppen, *Ireland since 1800: Conflict and Conformity* (London, 1989), pp. 83–94.

meaning ascribed to the Famine in the two to three decades following its ravages – contestations which in some ways prefigure those of economic historians writing more recently. The concern here is not with the nationalist tradition of Famine exegesis, well known through the narratives and polemics of John Mitchel, Charles Gavan Duffy, John O'Rourke and others, and anatomised by historians such as Patrick O'Farrell and James Donnelly.⁵ Rather, the focus here is on their rivals for influence and authority in post-Famine Ireland, particularly those Irish non-nationalists employing the discourse of political economy.

Political economy in Ireland was, as Tom Boylan and Tadgh Foley have demonstrated, conceived of by its promoters as a programmatic and didactic activity. Richard Whately, Anglican archbishop of Dublin from 1831, believed the introduction and dissemination of such a universal, 'scientific' and non-sectarian discourse a fundamental precondition for Irish social and moral advancement. The institutions established or promoted under his patronage – the Whately chair of political economy at Trinity College and later those at the Queen's Colleges, the elementary lessons in political economy embedded in the National Education Board's curriculum, the Barrington public lectures, and the Dublin Statistical Society – were all directed towards the public advancement of this new science in conscious competition with other popular discourses.⁶ Irish political economists were never unanimous on all matters, but by the later 1840s it is possible to discern a distinct 'Dublin school' of economic thought, acknowledging Whately as its founding father, but developing an increasingly self-conscious Irish voice in dialogue with the dominant British (and continental) forms of political economy, and in strong opposition to the twin heresies of demagogic nationalism and landed protectionism. Fitting the troubled economic and discursive context in which it emerged, Irish political economy tended to be 'applied' or problem-oriented in form, inductivist in method and didactic in style.⁷ In a perhaps unconscious echo of the divine trinity, Sir Robert Kane described the new science as 'one yet tripartite', appealing in due measure to 'the thinker, the observer and the man of action'.⁸

Interpreting the Famine, rationalising its consequences, and seeking to shape how the event should be remembered by the educated classes of both Ireland and Britain, was a pressing consideration in these decades. A remarkably unified

⁵ Patrick Farrell, 'Whose reality? The Irish Famine in history and literature', *Historical Studies*, 20:78 (1982), 1–13; James S. Donnelly, Jr., 'The construction of the memory of the Famine in Ireland and the Irish diaspora, 1850–1900', *Éire-Ireland*, 31:1&2 (1996), 26–61. ⁶ Thomas A. Boylan and Timothy P. Foley, *Political Economy and Colonial Ireland: the Propagation and Ideological Function of Economic Discourse in the Nineteenth Century* (London, 1992). ⁷ R.D.C. Black has identified a 'Dublin school' of economists associated with the Whately chair tending towards dissent from Ricardian orthodoxy. The term is used here more loosely to denote those Irish economists for whom the Dublin Statistical Society and its successor became the main intellectual forum from 1847. See R.D.C. Black, 'Trinity College, Dublin, and the theory of value', *Economica*, ns, 12 (1945), 140. ⁸ Sir Robert Kane, *The Address on the Opening of the Fifth Session of the Dublin Statistical Society* (Dublin, 1851), p. 4.

and concerted interpretation was articulated by the Dublin school in the late 1840s and achieved some public success in the 1850s. This trajectory was interrupted from the early 1860s both by renewed economic problems and novel intellectual conceptions, undermining the optimistic certainties of the previous decade. The outcome of the controversies of the 1860s were more pessimistic and polarised readings of the Famine, pointing some towards a harsh neo-Malthusian re-interpretation, and others towards the legitimisation of state intervention in Irish society that underlay both the Gladstonian Liberal and moderate nationalist social agendas of the final third of the nineteenth century.

The political-economic 'memory' of the Famine was shaped by the policy debates and interpretative polemics produced during the catastrophe itself. The later 1840s witnessed a rage of controversy, a struggle to assert and impose meaning, played out in speeches, lectures and sermons, the press and pamphlets, and in popular literature. With the collapse of mass popular politics from 1846, and the suppression of both revolutionary insurrectionism and agrarian conspiracies in 1848, the voices of famine victims and their (self-appointed) advocates were largely stifled. Other voices continued, however, to contest the purport of events and the optimal outcome of the catastrophe.

For Irish political economists, the late 1840s was a moment of acute importance. Irish society had, most believed, been dissolved through an unexpected but certainly not arbitrary act of nature or divine providence. The social reconstruction of the country was imperative, but if attempted upon erroneous economic principles would merely replicate the social and economic evils that had, painfully, been exposed and swept away in the wake of the potato blight. Their shared belief that the principles of Smithian political economy, combined with rigorous statistical investigation, offered a scientific blueprint for Irish regeneration, gave the Dublin school an intense sense of self-conscious mission. Optimism flowed from a combination of providentialist theodicy (a confidence that the potato blight had been divinely willed for ultimate human good), and an assurance, in the wake of the repeal of the corn laws, that the hegemony of free-trade liberalism was imminent, if not yet fully assured. Heresies of various kinds – nationalist, protectionist, statist, radical – still needed to be identified and refuted, but there was a confidence that the implementation of sound policy would rapidly produce universal benefits which would soon silence any remaining critics.

The profound optimism of these Irish political economists – an optimism dependent on the conscious suppression of consideration of the human devastation involved – is evident at the very nadir of the Famine itself. In contrast to their English mentors Richard Whately and Nassau Senior, who denounced the Whig government's poor-law policy as disastrous for Irish recovery,⁹ the Dublin economists were generally more positive about the likely outcome of the crisis.

⁹ Peter Gray, 'Nassau Senior, the *Edinburgh Review*, and Ireland 1843–49', in Tadgh Foley and Sean Ryder (eds), *Ideology and Ireland in the Nineteenth Century* (Dublin, 1998), pp. 130–42.

As professor of political economy at Trinity College in 1846–51, William Neilson Hancock was one of the foremost defenders of rigid adherence to ‘sound’ economic doctrine during the crisis. While critical of some aspects of policy (mainly for departing too far from strict laissez-faire), Hancock was less concerned about the consequences of a well-regulated poor law. Ireland was, he argued in 1847, suffering from the legacy of protectionism and the unnatural social system it had promoted; but the crisis was simply an ‘instance of the operation of the law of Divine economy in the moral government of the world’, which, if acknowledged and acted upon, would lead to national deliverance.¹⁰ Hancock felt the necessity of publicly refuting Charles Trevelyan’s dictum that ‘there is no hope for a nation which lives on potatoes’, contending that potatoes were merely the symbol and not the cause of Irish poverty, and that fetishising them as the root of Irish social evil merely distracted attention from the true causes. Despite this, it is evident that the two men shared much ideological ground in the late 1840s, as Hancock publicly praised both Trevelyan’s actions and the ‘most enlightened philanthropy’ informing his apologia, *The Irish Crisis*.¹¹ Both men were fundamentally anti-Malthusian, holding, in Hancock’s words, that it was ‘unscientific and erroneous to describe the population of Ireland as excessive’. Insufficient demand for the labour available to exploit Ireland’s abundant resources was the real problem; but the stimuli to productive employment, both agreed, must come from private enterprise rather than the state, as ‘every interference with the natural course of industry will retard’ the future ‘happy era’ of full employment and prosperity.¹²

Hancock’s solution to the problem of providing a non-interventionist stimulus to labour demand took the classic free-trade liberal form of the removal of obstacles to development – in this case taking the shape of ‘feudal’ land laws. Damned both by scientific economics and providential example, outdated legal restrictions on the sale and transfer of land, and on leasing and tenancy arrangements, were, he argued, the major blockages in the path of Irish recovery.¹³ Free trade in land would unlock the potential of Irish agriculture (and industry) by removing incapable proprietors, and by promoting capital investment in improved production. All classes, he concluded, would benefit through the increase of farming profits, and the demand for and remuneration of labour. No small part of the optimism of the Irish economists in the early 1850s was due to the endorsement of this reconstructivist vision provided by the government’s Encumbered Estates Act. With this legislative intervention, it appeared the preconditions for progress

¹⁰ W. Neilson Hancock, *Three Lectures on the Questions, Should the Principles of Political Economy be Disregarded at the Present Crisis? And If Not, How Can They Be Applied towards the Discovery of Measures of Relief?* (Dublin, 1847), p. 56. ¹¹ W. Neilson Hancock, *Two Papers Read before the Dublin Statistical Society ... II. A Notice of the Theory ‘That there is No Hope for a Nation Which Lives on Potatoes’* (Dublin, 1848), pp. 7–10. ¹² W. Neilson Hancock, *On the Condition of the Irish Labourer, being a Paper Read before the Dublin Statistical Society* (Dublin, 1848). ¹³ W. Neilson Hancock, *The Economic Causes of the Present State of Agriculture in Ireland, Parts I and II* (Dublin, 1848).

had at last been laid; 1849 was thus, for many economic commentators, what we might now term the 'year zero' of Ireland's regeneration.

Although by some degree the most prolific writer in the genre, Hancock was not alone in his campaign. The Dublin Statistical Society, founded in late 1847 as a debating and proselytising society under Whately's aegis, rapidly became a focus for like minds.¹⁴ Active members in its early years included Mountifort Longfield, a sophisticated economist and a former holder of the Whately chair, but also, as an Encumbered Estates Commissioner from 1849, a leading advocate of 'free trade in land'. Other prominent members were Jonathan Pim, the Quaker philanthropist who had also campaigned for such legislation since 1847, Sir Robert Kane, whose 1844 *The Industrial Resources of Ireland* had made the case that Ireland possessed vastly under-exploited natural resources, and similarly minded figures such as James A. Lawson and W.E. Hearn. The heterodox figure of Isaac Butt, a former Whately chair but deeply suspect because of his overt protectionism (and strident opposition to government famine policies), was kept firmly on the margins and was the target of a number of polemical attacks emanating from the Society.

In the early 1850s the Dublin economists saw their primary role as three-fold: to defend and further advance the principles of 'free trade in land' against landed obscurantism, to face down calls for state assistance to economic development or interference in landlord-tenant relations, and at the same time to promote Irish self-reliance in the face of British condescension. Their simultaneous critique of 'feudal' landownership patterns and 'communistic' calls for state regulation of landlord-tenant relations echoed the Cobdenite attack on landed power in Great Britain, but the Dublin school lacked both the political radicalism and the biting class antagonism of its counterpart. Their objective was a revived landlordism based upon strictly contractual relationships with capitalist tenant farmers and landless wage-labourers. For them, the overriding importance of Famine remembrance was thus to demonstrate the appalling consequences of adhering to traditional practices or false panaceas.

Hancock's 1850 essay on 'the causes of distress at Skull and Skibbereen' (two of the most notorious famine 'hot spots') was targeted at both. While John Stuart Mill's *Principles of Political Economy* was regarded by Irish economists as authoritative on many matters, his comments on Irish land were seen as highly suspect. In place of Mill's opinion that free competition for land by cottier peasants had promoted the rack-renting and immiseration on which famine preyed, Hancock insisted it was the land law which had impeded sale of indebted estates to the capitalist proprietors who would have employed more, raised wages and hence widened peasant diet, that had created acute vulnerability here and elsewhere in Ireland.¹⁵ Famine suffering was thus instrumentalised to sup-

¹⁴ For a recent history of this Society and its successor, see Mary E. Daly, *The Spirit of Earnest Inquiry: the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland, 1847-1997* (Dublin, 1997). ¹⁵ W. Neilson

port Smithian economic doctrines; if its horror was recalled, it was to be rationalised within an abstracted utilitarian calculus – as a measure of pain necessary to shock Ireland into reform and self-assistance.

W.E. Hearn, writing in an 1851 prize essay on the condition of Ireland, agreed: the Famine had been ‘the most dreadful ... known to the history of modern times’, but there were grounds for optimism now that ‘the system of cruel and abominable restraint [that] counteracted the kindness of Providence and superseded the industry and enterprise of man’ had been abandoned and the land ‘set free’.¹⁶ The 1851 census report (largely the work of Dublin Statistical Society members Thomas Larcom and William Wilde) had revealed a huge loss of population, but this could be rationalised as a necessary, if painful, part of Ireland’s reawakening – not because the country had been overpopulated, but because it had stagnated. In Hearn’s opinion:

this tempest of calamity has served to scourge before it the lazy elements, which, in our case at least, had stagnated into so fatal a pestilence. The indications exist of, it may be a slow, but still a steady, recovery ... The fearful decrease in our population ... could never have occurred except from a total disregard of all the laws which regulate social progress[.] ... Had the calamity befallen us under a sound social system, we could only bow with resigned submission to the stroke which we could not avert. But now we can distinctly trace the operation of human agencies, and we have to deal with results which man has caused, and which man can cure ... we must conquer nature by obeying her.¹⁷

Precisely which human agents were best suited to taming Irish nature was disputed. In the later 1840s the idea of a ‘new plantation’ of Ireland by entrepreneurial British landowners and farmers had acquired some popularity, particularly through the advocacy of Robert Peel. Some of the Encumbered Estates Act’s promoters regarded such a development as essential, and Queen Victoria’s first visit to Ireland, in August 1849, was partly predicated on the conviction that the visit would both symbolise the start of a new era in Ireland and render both tourism and investment in Irish land fashionable for the British propertied classes. *The Times*, for example, enthused that the queen had discovered the ‘secret of regenerating Ireland’; the visit was no ‘vain, fantastic or unmeaning pomp’ – but the outward show of a national unity which would be underpinned by economic integration. The ‘host of tourists and travellers’ who would follow in the queen’s train, would soon take advantage of the Encumbered

Hancock, *On the Causes of Distress at Skull and Skibbereen, during the Famine in Ireland, a Paper read before the Statistical Section of the British Association, at Edinburgh, August 2nd 1850* (Dublin, 1850).

¹⁶ William Edward Hearn, *The Cassell Prize Essay on the Condition of Ireland* (London, 1851), pp. 2, 14. ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 122–3. Hearn was at this time professor of Greek at Queen’s College, Galway.

Estates Act to invest in Ireland's future progress.¹⁸ The Irish government simultaneously commissioned the agriculturalist James Caird to prepare a survey of the suitability of Ireland for such a new British 'colonisation'. Indeed, throughout the 1850s a steady stream of literature appeared lauding the achievements and profits of (especially Scottish) purchasers and large tenant farmers, and urging more to follow the beneficial example of the pioneers who had helped Ireland escape from the horrors of famine.¹⁹

Hancock and his associates were, however, adamant that Ireland did not require such external assistance in its regeneration. Combining patriotic pride with a critique of erroneous conceptions of capital, Hancock argued that even in the depths of the disaster Ireland had never lacked reserves of capital, but simply the opportunity to employ these reproductively. Figures for holdings of government stock in Ireland appeared to indicate substantial surpluses throughout the 1840s, until the opportunities for land purchase siphoned much of this away after 1849. It was with some glee that he reported that only a small minority (around five percent) of purchasers under the Act were from outside the island. Ireland needed neither English capital nor Scots farmers, but merely the same laws that had unleashed dynamic entrepreneurship in Britain.²⁰ This was potentially an explosive argument, implying that large amounts of hoarded wealth had existed in Ireland in a time of mass mortality – something Irish landowners and their political allies had always denied – but for Hancock, immersed in a benign providentialism, this demonstrated not the illegitimacy of inequitable property rights but the folly of pre-scientific legislation.

Dublin school writers were confident that the apparent national prosperity of the mid to late-1850s demonstrated the accuracy of their analysis and soundness of their policy prescriptions. There had been some ambiguity in their attitudes towards mass emigration – while rejecting Malthusian claims of over-population, economists had welcomed voluntary migration as a necessary corrective to previous social dislocation, and as likely to create a beneficial equilibrium of wages and conditions for the emigrant and those who remained.²¹ Nevertheless, there was much satisfaction at the falling emigration rate by the mid-1850s, which was taken as evidence that 'reparative agencies' of emigration were working themselves

¹⁸ *The Times*, 3, 9, 11 August 1849. ¹⁹ James Caird, *The Plantation Scheme; or, the West of Ireland as a Field for Investment* (Edinburgh, 1850); William Bullock Webster, *Ireland Considered as a Field for Investment or Residence* (Dublin, 1852); Thomas Scott, *Ireland Estimated as a Field for Investment* (London, 1854); Thomas Miller, *The Agricultural and Social State of Ireland in 1858, being the Experience of Englishmen and Scotchmen who have Settled in Ireland* (Dublin, 1858). ²⁰ W. Neilson Hancock, *Is There Really a Want of Capital in Ireland? A Paper read before the Statistical Section of the British Association at Ipswich, July 3rd 1851* (Dublin, 1851); W. Neilson Hancock, *What are the Causes of the Prosperous Agriculture in the Lothians of Scotland?* (Belfast, 1852). ²¹ See, for example, D. Caulfield Heron, *Celtic Migrations; a Paper read before the Dublin Statistical Society* (Dublin, 1853); James A. Lawson, *On the Agricultural Statistics of Ireland. A Paper Read before the Dublin Statistical Society* (Dublin, 1854).

through. The process had been, Jonathan Pim assured the Dublin Statistical Society at its first meeting of the 1854–5 session, self-correcting. Famine destitution had now been swept away, the principles of political economy were everywhere gaining ground, and every economic indicator showed signs of unprecedented prosperity.²² Ireland was thus becoming what we might term ‘mid-Victorian’,²³ but, crucially for the Irish economists, it was doing so under its own steam, transforming itself from a diseased to a healthy limb of the British body politic.

This tone of liberal triumphalism dominated the proceedings of the Dublin Society in the following years. Ireland’s recovery, claimed Longfield in late 1855, had been rapid and uniformly beneficial. Agricultural wages were up by over 50 per cent, more land was cultivated than ever, prices were high, and profits evenly distributed. Political economists should now, he advised, address themselves to the evils of prosperity (such as public drunkenness) rather than those of poverty. So persuaded were the people of the truths of political economy, Lawson added, several years later, that ‘there is hardly a child in the national schools that could not establish the fallacy of ... [socialist] doctrines’.²⁴

This claim may have been somewhat exaggerated, but these hubristic conclusions were echoed by the intellectual organs of both the Whig–Liberal and Conservative parties in 1857. The *Edinburgh Review* and *Quarterly Review* both took advantage of the publication of George Nicholls’ history of the Irish poor law and the tenth anniversary of ‘Black ’47’ to draw attention to the ‘strange regeneration’ of Ireland, due equally, they claimed, to Providence and wise legislation. W.O. Morris’s article in the Liberal *Edinburgh* was enthusiastically positive: famine had ‘hastened to maturity’ both the ‘Repeal of the Corn Laws and the Social Revolution in Ireland – the two economic changes of our times which have been the best securities against national scarcity’. Trevelyan’s ‘steadfast faith in the wise purposes of Providence’ had been vindicated by events, for the last ten years had seen Ireland’s ‘deliverance from the bondage which had fastened a legal sterility on her fertile soil, and the apathy of pauperism on her intelligent people’.²⁵ It was in this intellectual climate that Trollope’s notorious excursus in the closing pages of *Castle Richmond* was composed. While the novelist had been acutely defensive of Trevelyanite policy in his *Examiner* letters of 1849, by 1860 he could be sure that a well-informed English readership would recognise that famine, pestilence and exodus ‘these three wonderful events, fol-

22 Jonathan Pim, ‘Address at the opening of the eighth session of the Society’, *Journal of the Dublin Statistical Society* [hereafter JDSS], 1 (January 1855), 6–25. 23 James H. Murphy prefers the term ‘Albertine’ to describe the ‘improving’ vision of many (including royal) observers of post-Famine Ireland, see *Abject Loyalty: Nationalism and Monarchy in Ireland during the Reign of Queen Victoria* (Cork, 2001), pp. 109–45. 24 Mountifort Longfield, ‘Address at the opening of the ninth session of the Society’, JDSS, 1 (January 1856), 153–64; James Anthony Lawson, ‘Address delivered at the opening of the eleventh session of the Society’, *ibid.*, 2 (March 1858), 142–60. 25 [W. O’C. Morris], ‘Social progress of Ireland’, *Edinburgh Review*, 106 (July 1857), 98–123; [Anon.], ‘Ireland past and present’, *Quarterly Review*, 102 (July 1857), 59–88.

lowing each other, were the blessings coming from Omniscience and Omnipotence by which the black clouds were driven from the Irish firmament', and that 'Ireland in her prosperity' was the foreordained consequence.²⁶

Nor was such optimism restricted to British observers. The celebrated French economist Léonce de Lavergne, reviewing the recent agrarian history of Ireland in 1855, was similarly impressed. Ireland's improvement had begun in the 1820s when English statesmen had renounced oppression for 'the more correct ideas of political economy', but it had taken the Famine to undo the results of misrule: 'the question remained to be solved by God; and that proved a terrible solution. All the long arrear of crime and error was to be atoned for only by an unexampled catastrophe.'²⁷ Emigration, consolidation and the Encumbered Estates Acts were now, he concluded, rapidly restoring Ireland to the pastoral agriculture which nature had intended for the country.

Irish economists continued to argue that additional measures were yet required to create a full contractualisation of land law in Ireland, but with Hancock now acting increasingly as a semi-official economic advisor to the Irish government, it was only a matter of time before these were implemented. The Cardwell-Deasy land acts of 1860, forming the pinnacle of 'free trade in land' in Ireland, were largely based on blueprints prepared by him for Dublin Castle. The powers of limited owners to grant leases and charge their estates for improvements were extended, tenants given a right to compensation for specified improvements made with the landowner's consent, and the landlord-tenant relationship was henceforth to be determined by 'the express or implied contract of the parties and not upon tenure or service.'²⁸

Yet simultaneously with this triumph of doctrinaire liberalism, doubts began to emerge. Between 1859 and 1864 Ireland was hit by a run of very poor harvests, a depression of agricultural prices, and by outbreaks of sheep rot and foot-and-mouth disease that devastated the pastoral economy. While the threat of a return to famine conditions was exaggerated by some for political reasons, the west of Ireland did suffer acutely. If, as James Donnelly has suggested, the proliferation of the small retail shops and massive imports of maize now helped stave off the risk of starvation, it was at the cost of a credit nexus that left both smallholders and small shopkeepers mired in debt.²⁹ The indicators of prosperity so lauded in the 1850s now pointed in a wholly different direction, and were readily grasped by both Conservative and nationalist critics; falling output and living standards and rising emigration seemed to give the lie to the idea that the

²⁶ Anthony Trollope, *Castle Richmond* ([1860] Oxford, 1989), p. 489. See also Yvonne Siddle's chapter, above, pp. 141–50. ²⁷ Léonce de Lavergne, *The Rural Economy of England, Scotland and Ireland* (Edinburgh, 1855), p. 375. ²⁸ W. Neilson Hancock, *Report on the Landlord and Tenant Question in Ireland, 1860–6: With an Appendix containing a Report on the Question, 1835–59* (Dublin, 1866); R.D. Collison Black, *Economic Thought and the Irish Question, 1817–70* (Cambridge, 1960), pp. 45–6. ²⁹ James S. Donnelly, Jr., 'The Irish agricultural depression of 1859–64', *Irish Economic and Social History*, 3 (1976), 33–54.

1845–50 Famine had permanently ushered in a new era of prosperity.³⁰ More ominous for the Dublin school was evidence of dissension within its own previously cohesive ranks. In January 1862 Denis Caulfield Heron, formerly professor of jurisprudence and political economy at Queen's College, Galway, questioned the narrative of progress in a paper read to the Dublin Statistical Society. Putting the economic history of Ireland into longer historical perspective, Heron identified the collapse of population since 1841 as a national disaster 'perfectly unparalleled in ancient or modern history', and one uncompensated for subsequently by any real socio-economic improvement. Ireland, he concluded, was 'beaten in the struggle for existence'. Heron repeated his charges, further supported by statistical evidence, in the 1864 session.³¹

Worryingly for the advocates of orthodoxy, Heron's papers were taken up and commented upon in other public arenas. One Protestant pamphleteer cited Heron's authority in his attack on Ireland's transformation into a 'cattle farm of England', to the benefit of a narrow class of 'dealers in corn, exporters of butter, provisions and cattle, ... the proprietors of the "monster" shops, [and] grocers', and at the expense of the agricultural poor. The horrors of the Famine, the author continued, had been aggravated by Russell's imposition of laws of political economy unsuited to Irish conditions; subsequent policy had sought to impose these same laws on Irish land at the cost of continuing depopulation and real economic stagnation.³² Other non-nationalists shared this sense of unease. One scientific pamphleteer warned that cattle plague might produce a crisis similar to the potato blight, and denounced 'the Red Indian or savage system of economic policy [which] will die, plague-stricken, like that system itself'.³³

While Heron's comments received some support from within the Dublin Society – one commentator agreed the evidence showed Ireland was now 'going to the dogs'³⁴ – the majority response was at first resoundingly negative. Randall MacDonnell and Hancock took pains to demonstrate that conditions were still substantially better than in 1845 and argued that a run of poor seasons should not be mistaken for a return to the status quo ante.³⁵ Hancock's semi-

³⁰ See, for example, Joseph Fisher, *How Ireland May be Saved; the Injurious Effects of the Present System of Agriculture on the Prosperity of Ireland and the Social Position of the Irish People* (London, 1862); Earl of Clancarty, *Ireland: Her Present Condition and What it Might Be* (Dublin, 1864).

³¹ D. Caulfield Heron, 'Historical statistics of Ireland', *JDSS*, 3 (June 1862), 235–55; 'Ireland in 1864', in *ibid.*, 4 (October 1864), 105–9. ³² [Anon.], *The Present and Future of Ireland as the Cattle Farm of England, and her Probable Population. With Legislative Remedies. By an Irish Merchant* (Dublin, 1865). ³³ [Anon.], *Cannabiculture in Ireland, its Profit and Possibility. By a Fellow of the Linnaean Society* (Dublin, 1866), p. 32. This writer urged instead agricultural diversification into cannabis cultivation, for which he alleged Ireland was ideally suited. Profit could be extracted from the production of hemp for rope and sacking, although the varied properties of its resin, 'first introduced into Europe as a medicinal agent by our countryman Dr O'Shaughnessy of Calcutta', were not to be overlooked. ³⁴ Michael Morris, in *JDSS*, 4 (October 1864), 111. ³⁵ Hancock, in *ibid.*, pp. 109–10; Randal W. MacDonnell, 'Statistics of Irish prosperity', in *ibid.*, 3 (December 1862), 268–78.

official report on the agricultural depression in 1863 urged its readers to recall the sufferings of the later 1840s and contrast these with the limited destitution of the early 1860s. Real improvement since the Famine, he reiterated, had reduced the country's vulnerability to such shocks.³⁶

Despite the seeming certainty of this rebuttal, there is evidence of ground starting to shift. Hancock's report lacked the providential assurance of his writings a decade previously, and his tone had become defensive rather than crusading. Emigration rather than entrepreneurship had now assumed the role of the primary agent of change; indeed Hancock tended now to rationalise Famine population decline as overwhelmingly a function of emigration rather than mortality, and thus as an unavoidable necessity rather than as the lamentable product of bad laws. This indicated something of a loss of confidence in the resolute anti-Malthusianism with which Hancock and associates had been previously associated.³⁷ Perhaps as significant was a growing sense that the 'defeudalising' project in land legislation was failing to deliver its anticipated returns. The 1860 legislation did not produce the idealised contractual relations its advocates had foretold, not least because the depression tended to antagonise economic competition in the countryside coinciding with a renewal of nationalist agitation. In his 1862 offensive Heron revived the call for state guarantees of tenant security and drew attention to the model of continental peasant proprietorships. This was one of the heresies of the 1840s which the Dublin Statistical Society had sought to combat, but which it now increasingly lacked the confidence to resist. Hancock was particularly exposed; he had long argued that the customary tenant right of his native Ulster would be best protected by voluntary contracts, but post-1860 experience threw this into doubt. Others also showed signs of wavering; John Kells Ingram in a November 1863 address stressed the economic benefits of mass emigration, and echoed the call to remember the Famine as a lesson in the costs of backwardness, yet also drew attention to the need for improved tenant security and raised the possibility that Ireland might follow the continental rather than English path of agrarian development.³⁸ In the following decades, Ingram and others would shift decisively to the former proposition, embracing a historicist and particularist reading of the Irish situation.

The ambiguities evident in the early 1860s were further developed as the decade proceeded. The economy may have recovered somewhat from the trough of 1859-63, but the political challenge posed by Fenianism perpetuated the sense of crisis in Ireland. Isaac Butt also now returned to the forefront of economic and political controversy, denouncing the perennial 'transition stage' of Irish development that seemed to offer no end to mass emigration, and seek-

³⁶ W. Neilson Hancock, *Report on the Supposed Progressive Decline of Irish Prosperity* (Dublin, 1863), pp. 67-8. ³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 9-15. For criticism of Hancock's earlier stance, see Frederick G. Evelyn, 'Malthus', *JDSS*, 1 (July 1855), 125-36. ³⁸ J.K. Ingram, 'Considerations on the state of Ireland, an address delivered at the opening of the seventeenth session', *JDSS*, 4 (January 1864), 13-26.

ing to tie moderate nationalism to land reform.³⁹ Butt was frank in citing his emotional repulsion to obligatory emigration scenes as the prime motivation for his initiative, but the Famine also played a significant part. The catastrophe had been no new departure, he asserted, but the awful outcome of what should have been a 'golden period' for Irish agriculture, marred by political and economic oppression. 'Is it too late' he concluded rhetorically, in an 1867 treatise on Irish land, 'to lay the lessons [of the Famine] to our hearts?'⁴⁰

The 'turn' in more mainstream economic thought was most noticeable in the case of that cornerstone of Dublin economics, Mountifort Longfield. His expert evidence to the parliamentary committee on the Landed Estates Court in 1865 publicised doubts concerning the consequences of what had been lauded in 1849 as Ireland's panacea: 'speculators', he now recognised, had purchased a considerable proportion of estates with the express intention of subdivision and exploitative rent-extraction. Increased tenant insecurity and under-investment had been the inevitable result.⁴¹ His presidential address at the opening of the 1865 session of the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland (as the Dublin Statistical Society had become in 1862) indicated the need for practical remedies. 'Wise legislation' was now required to control the 'oppressive landlord', to guarantee tenant compensation for improvements and check unjustified rent increases.⁴² Longfield's suggestions remained cautious and in line, he believed, with the general opinion of the Society, but the departure of principle from the 1850s could not have been greater and was widely reported.

Longfield's ideas were worked out at greater length in his Cobden Club essay on Irish land tenure published in 1870. While he did not renounce his opinion that the condition of Irish farmers had steadily improved since the Famine, with land values rising more rapidly than rents, and that the Encumbered Estates Act had introduced more improving landlords, he acknowledged that rural discontent had a real basis (albeit exaggerated by interested agitators):

The reason for [it] is partly that they fear their present prosperity is insecure, and partly that they hope to seize upon something more. Their wealth is as safe as that of any other class, so far as it depends upon their capital, or their skill and industry; but it depends upon the will of the landlords, so far as it is a consequence of their holding land at less than the competition value. They are too dependent upon their landlords. It is not convenient that the prosperity of one class of men should depend upon the liberality of another class.⁴³

³⁹ Isaac Butt, *The Irish People and the Irish Land: A Letter to Lord Lifford* (Dublin, 1867). ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 294–5. ⁴¹ *Select Committee on Tenure and Improvement of Land (Ireland) Act ... Minutes of Evidence*, Parliamentary Papers, 1865 [402], XI, 2. ⁴² Mountifort Longfield, 'Address at the opening of the eighteenth session', *Journal of the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland*, 4 (January 1865), 129–37. ⁴³ Mountifort Longfield, 'The tenure of land in Ireland', in J.W. Probyn (ed.), *Systems of Land Tenure in Various Countries: A Series of Essays Published under the*

This was not a wholesale repudiation of his previous pronouncements, rather an implicit admission of their limitations. Longfield's scheme – which would grant of fixity of tenure while retaining a role for the market in rent adjustment – came to nothing in 1870, but his intervention marked an abandonment of the rigid laissez-faire principles of the 1850s.

If Longfield's conversion was cautious and piecemeal, the most important Irish economist to emerge in the decade, T.E. Cliffe Leslie, was scathing of the assumptions he had himself shared as a member of the Dublin Statistical Society in the 1850s.⁴⁴ Claims for Irish regeneration, Leslie wrote in 1867, had been repeatedly made in various historical moments, but invariably falsified by experience. The period since Famine was no exception. Ireland had in fact gained relatively little from the international economic boom of the 1850s due to non-interventionist policies and the slavish imitation of the flawed English system of rural development. What economists had lauded as proofs of unprecedented growth turned out on further inspection to indicate a profound failure to exploit the unprecedentedly favourable economic climate.⁴⁵ This seeming blindness to reality led Leslie to assault the deductivist principles of the discipline; what had previously passed for the 'science' of political economy had in practice been, he argued in 1868 in a turn of phrase oddly prescient of postmodern critiques, merely language employed in the service of powerful interests. This applied most clearly with respect to emigration – the causes and consequences of which Leslie held to be widely and willfully misconstrued. Famine emigration, as well as that which followed, amounted merely to a 'wasteful depopulation', which had produced much misery but few if any net gains.⁴⁶ It followed for Leslie that radical land reform was the chief solution (albeit accompanied by public works and improved agricultural education); in a series of articles in the late 1860s he advocated legislative interference to grant security to small occupiers, and state assistance to land purchase. He would reiterate this position in an article published at the height of the Land War in 1880.⁴⁷

Leslie became widely known in the 1870s as the foremost advocate of historicist economics and a leading player in the so-called 'English *Methodenstreit*', but his 'almost pathological' rejection in the 1860s of the form of classical economics he associated with Nassau Senior appears to have been provoked primarily by moral anger at the perceived state of Ireland. Sir Henry Maine's stadiasial historicism was available as an alternative model (Leslie had attended Maine's lectures in 1857), but Leslie transcended the rather quietist conclusions of his mentor. As one commentator has recently stated, 'the order of Leslie's consideration ... was not so much from methodology to theory to policy, as traditionally perceived, but more from policy to theory to methodology'.⁴⁸

Sanction of the Cobden Club ([1870], new edn, London, n.d. [1881]), p. 6. ⁴⁴ Leslie had been a Barrington lecturer in 1852–3. ⁴⁵ T.E. Cliffe Leslie, 'The state of Ireland, 1867', in *Land Systems and Industrial Economy of Ireland, England and Continental Countries* (London, 1870), pp. 5–33. ⁴⁶ T.E. Cliffe Leslie, 'Political economy and emigration', in *ibid.*, pp. 85–116. ⁴⁷ T.E. Cliffe Leslie, 'The Irish land question', *Fraser's Magazine*, 22 (1880), 828–42. ⁴⁸ Gregory

In the later 1860s Irish (and British) political economy fractured. Leslie's advocacy of an Irish solution suited to specifically Irish historical development (although drawing on European and Indian parallels) attracted the attention of British Liberals and other Dublin school figures like Ingram and H.D. Hutton. J.S. Mill's radical instincts on Irish land, dormant since the appearance of the first edition of his *Principles of Political Economy* in 1848, were revived in the wake of Longfield's declaration and further inspired by Cliffe Leslie. Other historicising voices – most notably the Indian administrator Sir George Campbell (also a disciple of Maine) – joined the tumult that would bear first fruit in Gladstone's 1870 Land Act and the interventionist principle this embodied. Leslie's critique (building on Heron's) rejected the assertion that Famine and post-famine 'defeudalisation' had brought Ireland into the mainstream of Victorian British life. Even Hancock arrived at a similar position through a different route, converting to a historicist perspective whilst serving as editor of the Brehon Law tracts in the mid-1860s, and subsequently endorsing Gladstone's 1870 and 1881 land acts.⁴⁹ His collaborator on the Brehon tracts, Alexander Richey, later summed up the historicist view in an 1880 book: no law dealing with contracts in land was in itself objectively good or bad, all depended on the context of the social conditions in which it was applied. The political economists of the 1850s had profoundly misunderstood the developmental stage of Irish society, and their policies had therefore failed.⁵⁰

Adherents to economic orthodoxy in turn shifted away from optimism to pessimism in the 1860s. One anonymous member of the Statistical Society warned in 1865 that lower rents were necessary for social peace, but saw no way of achieving this except by appeals to landlord conscience. A more direct way to relieve misery, the author continued, would be to promote further emigration, but only in the context of a strict Malthusian re-education of the lower orders. Ireland's (and implicitly Irish political economy's) neglect of such truths had been the cause of recent suffering:

Had our instructors in bygone years invariably given due prominence to this self-evident principle, and we had taken the instructions to heart, our country would never have been visited with the awful calamities of 1846 and 1847. Our numbers would have steadily increased with the expansion of our national wealth, but not more rapidly; the demand for land would not have outgrown the supply; rents would have continued moderate, and would have left our farmers the means of a comfortable

C.G. Moore, 'T.E. Cliffe Leslie and the English *Methodenstreit*', *Journal of the History of Economic Thought*, 17 (1995), 57–77; see also Gerard M. Koot, 'T.E. Cliffe Leslie, Irish social reform, and the origins of the English historical school of economics', *History of Political Economy*, 7 (1975), 312–36. ⁴⁹ Clive Dewey, 'Celtic agrarian legislation and the Celtic revival: historicist implications of Gladstone's Irish and Scottish land acts 1870–1886', *Past & Present*, 64 (1974), 43–9. ⁵⁰ Alexander G. Richey, *The Irish Land Laws* (London, 1880), pp. 3, 47–61.

subsistence; labour would have received an adequate compensation, and even our poorest class of workmen would have been able to make some provision for the incidence of a year of scarcity.⁵¹

The responses of Lords Dufferin and Rosse, previously patrons of the Dublin Statistical Society, to the turn in economic debate was also resoundingly negative. Rosse wrote in response to those 'original thinkers' who now denied the universalism of economic laws and the assimilationism this had endorsed; the Famine, he lectured the deluded Millites, had been foreseen by enlightened political economists like Malthus, Ricardo and Senior as the consequence of excessive population. Then as now, only mass emigration and consolidation offered any hope for the future.⁵² Dufferin agreed, arguing that mass emigration was no calamity but the most beneficial mode of responding to the Malthusian imperative. In an extraordinary *volte-face* from his own youthful opinions during the Famine, Dufferin now recalled that event as a stern test of the resolve of Ireland's landlords in doing their economic duty:

[the landlord's] position was every whit as bad ... his lands lay around him a poisonous waste of vegetable decay, while 25s. in the pound of poor-rate was daily eating up the fee-simple of his estate. Self-interest, duty, common sense, all dictated the same course – the enlargement of the boundaries, the redistribution of farms, and the introduction of a scientific agriculture, at whatever cost of sentiment or of individual suffering. Even so, the struggle too frequently proved unsuccessful, and the subsequent obliteration of nearly an entire third of the landlords of Ireland, while it associates them so conspicuously with the misfortunes of their tenants, may be accepted in atonement of whatever share they may have had in conniving at those remoter causes which aggravated the general calamity.⁵³

Even the Statistical Society stalwart William Wilde concluded that the Famine had been essential to begin the thinning of Ireland's population, and that the 'manifest destiny of the Celt' now lay in emigration. The 'stern policeman of progress' should not be impeded in moving on those who were incapable of prospering in the land of their birth.⁵⁴ Such 'pessimistic' views found their supporters, in England as well as Ireland,⁵⁵ but were now decidedly defensive in tone; political economy no longer spoke with a single tongue on the legacy of the Great Famine.

51 [Anon.], *The Real Wants of the Irish People. By a Member of the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland* (Dublin, 1865), pp. 38–9. 52 Earl of Rosse, *A Few Words on the Relation of Landlord and Tenant in Ireland, and in Other Parts of the United Kingdom* (London, 1867), pp. 49–50. 53 Lord Dufferin, *Irish Emigration and the Tenure of Land in Ireland* (London, 1867), p. 54. 54 William R. Wills Wilde, 'Ireland: past and present: the land and the people', in *Lectures Delivered Before the Dublin Young Men's Christian Association in Connexion with the United Church of England and Ireland, during the Year 1864* (Dublin, 1865), pp. 220–6. 55 By the 1880s a Malthusian interpretation of the Famine was common in British commentary, see for example *The Times*, 21

In conclusion, what can be termed the 'Dublin school' of political economists united in the 1850s in devoting considerable attention to the meaning and significance of the Famine.⁵⁶ The dominant reading of the Famine was through the prism of a formula at once utilitarian and providentialist. The mass suffering and social upheavals of the 1840s had been a horrific yet necessary measure of pain, essential to force the removal of obstacles to the future happiness of all. The intensity of the catastrophe had in fact been merciful, Jonathan Pim declared in 1854, as 'the excess of suffering was the very reason why that suffering should be of short duration'.⁵⁷ Yet this interpretation proved vulnerable to economic fluctuations, intellectual innovation, and the more unsettled political climate of the 1860s, all promoting something of a paradigm shift in Irish economics. Neither the agricultural crisis of the early 1860s nor the Fenian alarms that followed could easily be accommodated by the liberal political-economy narrative so strongly and confidently articulated in the post-Famine decade.

Furthermore, Dublin school economics had difficulty accommodating itself to the decline of providentialist modes of thought from the 1850s. In the wake of the *Origin of Species* and *Essays and Reviews* wholehearted assurance in the benign divine governance of human affairs was more problematic for public intellectuals, and the developing incarnationist turn in Protestant theology offered little to Christian political economy.⁵⁸ What replaced it was something more secular – either a neo-classical turn to a Malthusianism shorn of its originator's concern for theodicy, or a new historicist economics that stressed the particularity of national developments but left little place for universal 'laws of God and nature'. Both tended to perceive the Famine and its legacy more negatively, to deprive it of the emancipatory role it had once held. The catastrophe now served increasingly as a symbol of Irish difference, and no longer as the dawn of a new Victorian age of integration and prosperity.

June 1887. ⁵⁶ This interpretation contradicts that of Nien-he Hsieh, 'The conspicuous absence of examination questions concerning the Great Irish Famine: political economy as science and ideology', *European Journal of the History of Economic Thought*, 6:2 (1999), 169–99. Hsieh argues that the absence of questions relating to the Famine in examinations for the Whately chair between 1846 and 1882 demonstrates the Famine's marginality to Irish political economy. Such a 'silence' may, however, be more apparent than real; if there were no specific references to a fully conceptualised 'Great Famine' in the questions, it is evident that candidates were invited to address topics closely associated with political-economic interpretations of the crisis, including questions of population, free trade, the poor law and land tenure. In the absence of the candidates' answers it is impossible to analyse the extent to which they were prepared to respond to such questions with reference to the Irish experience of the later 1840s, and this lack of evidence must render Hsieh's thesis 'not proven'. It might, however, be safely inferred from the writings, lectures and debates of examiners and candidates such as Whately, Hancock, Longfield and Leslie – public discourse which Hsieh appears unduly ready to dismiss – that the Famine did continue to preoccupy Irish political economists in the post-Famine decades. ⁵⁷ Pim, 'Address', *JDSS*, 1 (January 1855), 10. ⁵⁸ See Boyd Hilton, *The Age of Atonement: the Influence of Evangelicalism on Social and Economic Thought, 1785–1865* (Cambridge, 1988), pp. 298–349.