Famine, Land and Politics: British Government and Irish Society, 1843-50

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The sesquicentenary period of the Great Irish Famine has seen a great outpouring of books, articles, newspaper features, TV and radio programmes. Mary Robinson made a big issue of the famine as something which held up Anglo-Irish rapprochement in a Northern Ireland context; Tony Blair duly apologised for the then British government's role during the crisis of the late 1840s. Popular audiences and academics, too, have shown a voracious appetite for works on this human tragedy, what Gray himself describes as 'western Europe's most profound social crisis of the modern era'. They have come to understand that the famine cannot be airbrushed from history and that its legacy needs to be met full on.

However, the fact that so many works have appeared in the past five years or so is interesting because, for a long time (perhaps until the famine's centenary period, 1945-51/2), very little had been written that attempted objectively to assess the scars-economic, social, political, psychological-of *An Gorta Mór* upon Irish society. The appearance of T.W. Moody and Robin Dudley Edwards' *The Great Famine*, in 1952, marked something of a watershed. It was a dense, scholarly collection of essays in the 'Oxford History of'-style, with leading scholars and younger historians commissioned to work on important features of the famine and its legacy. The 1960s were dominated by Cecil Woodham Smith's popular novel-style history, *The Great Hunger*, a haunting, lyrical, accusatory book which aimed to deal a series of withering blows at the British body politic, excoriating the principal players, especially Charles Trevelyan and Charles Wood. *The Great Hunger* almost immediately struck a popular chord with its flowing literary style; its presentation of some of the most horrific images of famished life and ghoulish death that contemporary observers could muster. The contrast between these two volumes captures well the problem of assessing whether the Famine was a tragedy made worse by blunder or by a piece of intentional evil masquerading as political economy in practice. Either way, the British political and administrative systems stood in the dock. For all that Woodham Smith struck a chord, however, her book hardly stands as a sufficient monument either to the suffering of the victims or the complexities of those who deliberated on Ireland's future. Christine Kinealy's *This Great Calamity* (the title comes from a phrase borrowed from one the principal actors of the time, Charles Trevelyan) sought to deal with much of the ground covered by Gray, although her study focuses primarily on the administration, or maladministration, of famine relief. While Kinealy's book is very different from Woodham Smith's (for one thing, the research is deeper), the basic 'bad Britain' is still quite close to surface. This is likely to be the case when one focuses on the administration: it was cruel by almost any standards. However, while such a position is defensible, it does mean all the angles have to be covered-and this is where, for me, Gray's book comes into its own.

Gray takes the level of learning to new depths. He is determined to provide a rounded account of the political and intellectual world that enveloped the administration of famine relief and explained the nature of debates about what was to be done for the Irish. Though he undeniably and correctly concludes with a passionate, but balanced attack on the harshness of political economy in action, he strives to bring an old-fashioned and much-maligned epistemological concept, objectivity, to bear on proceedings. Gray declares that his sphere of interest is old-fashioned 'high politics', and, in so doing, does himself a disservice. If British politicians were to blame for the calamity that followed the natural disaster of *phytophtora infestans*, 'Potato Blight'-and it can very easily be argued that they were-then 'high politics' is surely a sphere we would neglect at our peril. I must say that I did not find the approach of Gray to be boring, elitist or somehow uninteresting. Instead, I felt electrified and terrified by the author's skill in uncovering his subjects' will. For those who are familiar with the somewhat inaptly named 'nationalist-revisionist' debate in Irish historiography, Gray's plea for objectively will be additionally interesting. Some scholars seem to favour an alternative 'subjective' reading of Irish history to counter supposedly spurious claims to objectivity from those with different views. Some prefer to see objectivity as a sort of Anglo-Saxon (possibly Anglo-Germanic) conspiracy conferred upon the Irish academe by a generation of servile professions who aped their Rankeian counterparts in Oxford and Cambridge. Scholars without axes to grind, and those who have protected their senses from the sirens of postmodernism, will admire Gray's method, work-rate and conclusions.

This is by far the best book written on the Famine: perhaps only Donal Kerr's *A Nation of Beggars* comes close to Gray's understanding of complexities of what unfolded when social crisis in Ireland met political recalcitrance in England. What, then, does Gray tell us? With a subject so politically loaded as the Famine it might be as well to begin at the end, with the author's conclusion. He cites what he calls a 'providentialist apology' written by Anthony Trollope in 1860, in which the writer casts famine, pestilence and emigration as 'three wonderful events' that were 'blessings coming from Omniscience and Omnipotence by which the black clouds were driven from the firmament.' Given that emigration from western Ireland had not reached its peak in the year when Trollope wrote, Gray is additionally correct to stress, in relation to Trollope's remark, that 'the historian would find it impossible to conclude that the ends of policy justified the appalling and unnecessary cost in human life.' The author's position is quite clear, then; what is more important, however, is the way he seeks to explain precisely what government did, what underpinned the frame of mind behind policy, and how the approaches of London-based ruling elites impacted upon Ireland.

What Gray attempts to stress is the centrality of land in determining the execution of British policy in Ireland. Catholic Emancipation showed that other things mattered to the Irish. However, while the country remained so poor, and while its poor remained so dependent on subsistence farming of potatoes, and so long as social cleavage between landlords and tenants defined relations, then the way in which land was used, or left idle, and the role played by those who owned most of the country, were bound to dominate Irish lives. The decade after 1845 demonstrated to all and sundry just how important the land was. Opinion may have differed as to the resolution of this crisis, but the interest in Ireland remained high irrespective of viewpoints. The famine undoubtedly increased the eagerness of the British ruling elite to find an answer to Ireland's land problem. That they were still struggling with the problem in 1900 should not deflect us from an appreciation of just how intently some people viewed Ireland's land issue, even if they themselves could not feel the pain of the people where it really mattered. For the proponents of liberal economics, the Famine also offered an opportunity to engineer a new social system in Ireland based upon a reformed system of landholding. This is why early state initiatives for assisted emigration (paltry as they were) were brought into being during the famine storm; this is also why poor law reforms denied the right of those most in need to hold on to their land and receive relief. But the epithets were not reserved only for the poor who held up progress. The dream of a new future for Ireland was also meant to involve sacrifices for the landholders. Critics of Irish landlordism, such as John Stuart Mill (who wrote a famous series of articles in the *Morning Chronicle* in the early years) characterised Ireland's landowners as under-taxed absentees who lacked the social responsibility of their English counterparts.

Gray's book builds on Irish traditions but also English ones. It is a book that locks closely into the debates on Ireland's most apocalyptic famine, as they have been developed by Irish academics; but he also engages with a mainstream historiographical interest in the role of elites in British politics. This is entirely apt, for, in a sense, Gray's approach perfectly mirrors the way in which the famine drama unfolded. Whilst the dying was done down country lanes in remote parts of western Ireland, as well as on the streets and in the crowded workhouses of Irish towns, much of important talking, helpful or otherwise, took place in London. Gray's study thus develops and significantly enhances a line of thinking, about high politics and political economy, previously discussed by writers such as Boyd Hilton and Peter Mandler. As well as a contribution to our appreciation of famine policy this book is also a very detailed and original examination of the coalition of interests that comprised the Whig-Liberal alliance of the period. Gray notes three key groupings. 'The Foxites', with their ethos of necessary reformism, who were led by Lord John Russell himself. The 'moderate liberals included Anglo-Irish landowners who, as adherents to orthodox political economy, were bent upon improving Ireland, not least by sweeping aside those obstacles which blocked their progress. The third group, 'the moralists (whom Gray sees as ultimately dominant) were driven by a providential zeal; for them, the famine was an act of God, with death and suffering divinely ordained as a vital precursor to the emergence of a new order. For the moralists, society was governed by moral laws, which, in the case of Ireland, would lead to a new independence-just so long as those laws were allowed to operate in an unfettered fashion. The moralists' viewpoint does seem to have received the nod in the press. It had the advantage of costing less than the other approaches, though this is not why the *Times* and numerous provincial papers supported the idea that God's hand could be discerned to be at work in Ireland in 1845. But it is impossible to know how far the moralist line was independent of the new anti-Irishness of 1848. The Irish Rising of 1848 turned even the once supportive *Punch* against the Irish people, and local papers copied the nationals in denigrating the Irish as selfish ingrates.

None of this is to say that government did nothing in Ireland. Peel's short tenure, down to his fall over the repeal of the Corn Laws, saw greater exertion by government than did Russell's tenure, although, as Gray argues, there was greater continuity in public policy between these administrations than some scholars have noted. Gray's book points out just how tortuous debates about what to do for Ireland could be. More than that, however, it also demonstrates that, whatever the tenor of the debate, policy was almost always underpinned by some supposedly loftier sense of direction. (The fact that God led the way while administrators genuflected to the cruel calculus of political economy does not mean that this was an aimless journey.) Liberal policy-makers in the mid- to late-1840s believed that a government's job was to facilitate change; that laissez-faire did not mean absolute non-intervention but an involvement ordered by moral consideration. This is why, today, there is no escaping the harshness of what was done-and what was not done. The 'Justice for Ireland' slogan which had connected O'Connellites to Russell's Foxite caucus at the beginning of the famine began to sound hollow and was lost as the cruel providential idealism of the moralists began to win ground.

Peter Gray has produced a book of enormous scholarship. It is essential reading for historians of Ireland and Britain alike. The depth of the scholarship (not least the immense range of MS sources and contemporary writings), the balance of the conclusions, and the overall confidence with such as difficult terrain is probed, will surely guarantee a pressing relevance and importance for years to come.

The author is pleased to accept the review and will not be responding further.

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