

Reviews

Legacy of famine

Peter Gray: *Famine, Land and Politics: British Government and Irish Society, 1843–50* (Irish Academic Press, 1999)

Reviewed by Iain Sharpe

The Irish Famine is one of the few nineteenth-century historical events that continues to generate controversy in contemporary politics: witness Tony Blair's apology to the Irish people for the famine or Governor Pataki's prescription for teaching the famine as deliberate genocide in New York schools. This powerful legacy has its impact on historians too. The best-known book about the famine, Cecil Woodham-Smith's *The Great Hunger*, has been criticised for its emotive style and emphasis on blame; especially for the demonisation of Charles Trevelyan, the Assistant Secretary to the Treasury during the famine years. At the same time, academic historians of the famine who have taken a more detached tone have been criticised for 'desensitising the trauma'.

It is to Peter Gray's credit, therefore, that he has avoided either of these pitfalls. He is not afraid to allocate blame and to make judgements – some of them very severe on British policy-makers – yet he avoids using the famine to force a wider point about British rule in Ireland. He also deserves praise for breaking new ground in famine studies. While there has been a lot of work on the administrative, social and economic explanations for the famine, Gray focuses on the high politics of the period and in particular on the decision-making of the British cabinet, both Tory and Whig/Liberal, during the 1840s. In doing so he places responsibility where it belongs, with the government rather than with the

local or national administrators. Charles Trevelyan, who has often been cast as the chief villain in the famine saga, is by no means exonerated by Gray, but his role is placed in its proper perspective.

The central irony of the book is that it should be a government led by Lord John Russell that presided over this great tragedy. Among British politicians Russell had been the most consistent advocate of 'justice for Ireland': the belief that Irish Catholics could only be reconciled to the union with Great Britain if they were seen to have genuine religious equality and have a chance to play a full part in the government of the country. Gray categorises Russell's views as 'Foxite', based on the tradition of Charles James Fox. Under the Melbourne administration of 1835–41, Foxite Whigs had dominated Irish policy. Catholics were promoted to important positions within the government, an Irish Poor Law was enacted, a non-sectarian Irish constabulary was established and there was no recourse to coercive legislation to keep the peace.

Therefore, as Jonathan Parry describes earlier in this issue, when Russell took office as prime minister in July 1846, after five years of Conservative administration under Peel, the prospects for conciliation in Ireland had never looked brighter. Russell promised a 'golden age' with a 'large and comprehensive' scheme of reforms. These were to include state endowment of the Catholic Church, a widening of the franchise and land

reform. The formation of the Russell administration was welcomed by Daniel O'Connell who had joined forces with the Whigs to bring down Peel. Yet by the time Russell left office in 1852 his government had presided over an Irish famine that left about one million dead and had achieved little in the way of reforming legislation. Where did it all go wrong?

Gray attributes the failure of Russell's Irish policy to the prime minister's lack of mastery over his own cabinet ('Russell was no Gladstone', he says) and to the nature of the divisions within the Whig/Liberal government. The government was divided into three main groups, which Gray categorises as 'Foxite' (of whom Russell himself was the main cabinet representative); 'moderates' (usually large landowners, often with land in Ireland); and 'Moralists' (extreme advocates of free trade and political economy, often with evangelical Christian leanings). No one of these three groups predominated, yet their differences were sufficient to create inertia in attempts to initiate comprehensive schemes of either land reform or famine relief.

Attempts to legislate for increased rights for tenants fell foul of moderate and moralist concerns about state interference with freedom of contract, as did a bill for state-sponsored reclamation of waste lands through compulsory purchase schemes. Attempts to promote free sale of land by breaking up so-called 'encumbered' estates in order to attract new investors initially proved abortive as landlords' concerns led to the watering down of the government's 1848 Encumbered Estates Bill. A strengthened bill passed through parliament the following year, but schemes for government loans to enable tenant purchase of land also failed as a result of concerns about state interference in trade. Even proposals for endowment of the Catholic Church fell foul of the opposition of the Catholic hierarchy, while the extension of the franchise, enacted in 1850, was much watered down from Russell's original plans.

The government's record in dealing with the immediate problem

of food shortage was no better. It is estimated that around one million people died of famine-related causes during the years 1846–50. While Woodham-Smith contrasted the compassionate attitude of the Peel administration with the rigid ideology of Russell's government, Gray is more inclined to stress the continuities of policy. Peel tried to tackle the problem of food shortages in three main ways. First, the government purchased grain to deal with the most severe shortages. Second, the government provided matching funding for money raised by local relief committees. Lastly, it instituted a programme of public works to enable the poor to buy food. Russell's government has been criticised for the speed with which it dismantled these schemes. But Peel had only ever intended these to be temporary measures and there was a belief that the food shortages would prove temporary, as had been the case in other years when the potato crop had failed.

The change of administration enabled the moralist Trevelyan, the permanent under secretary at the Treasury, to exercise more influence over the inexperienced new ministers than he had over Peel's government. Trevelyan and moralist ministers were suspicious of government purchase of food in case it drove up market prices. There was also what Gray describes as a 'fetishisation' of the need to prevent

abuse of relief mechanisms either by those falsely claiming destitution or by landowners trying to evade their own responsibilities by using government funds to improve their estates. Hysteria about 'benefit fraud' is not just a phenomenon of our own era.

However, the Russell administration's famine policy was not without its successes. The replacement of the largely inefficient public works system with direct relief through soup kitchens was largely successful, although fear of abuse led the government to phase them out too quickly. And a public appeal was launched in the spring of 1847, initiated by a letter from Queen Victoria, which raised nearly £435,000 for famine relief from the British public. But sympathy for Ireland's plight evaporated quickly, especially in the wake of the successful potato crop and bumper grain harvest in Ireland in 1847, and the Young Ireland rising in the summer of 1848. Despite the continuing shortages in Ireland, a further appeal later supported by the Queen raised just £20,000. The worsening economic situation in Britain in 1847–48 and the pressure from the large radical grouping in parliament for government retrenchment also militated against generous government action. Gray is clear that the lack of enthusiasm in Britain for generous famine relief measures was not just a matter of the ideology of government ministers, but also of their well-grounded fears that public opinion was hostile to spending money on Ireland.

The government sheltered behind the view that relief should be dealt with locally through the workings of the Irish Poor Law: it was up to the Irish landlords to take responsibility for their own poor. The providentialist ideology of Trevelyan and the cabinet moralists led them to believe that the famine was part of the divine will: a wake up call to the Irish landlord and peasant alike to exert themselves more to modernise their agriculture. Russell, while not sharing their providentialism or rigid economic views, tended to agree with the cabinet moralists about

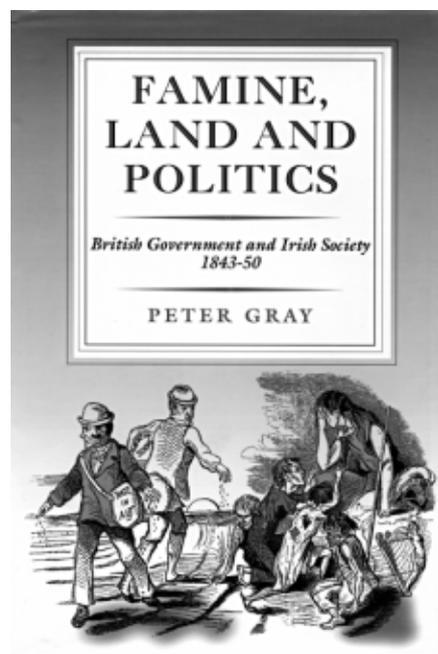
the failings of the landlords. The story of government famine policy in 1848–49 comes across as an almost Kafkaesque tale: a succession of well-meaning proposals from Russell and his Irish Viceroy Clarendon to deal with the catastrophic conditions in Ireland, nearly all of which were stifled by the Treasury and the moralists in the cabinet.

For students of history who are also partisans of the Liberal tradition in British politics, this book makes painful reading. This episode probably represents the greatest failure of nineteenth-century Liberal government in Britain. If the intention of Russell and his Foxite colleagues was to reconcile Catholic Ireland to the union, the impact of government policy was the negation of this: a demonstration that Britain was not prepared to treat Ireland as an integral part of the United Kingdom, as it should have been under the terms of the union. As the future Irish Home Rule leader Isaac Butt put it:

When calamity falls on us we are... told that we then recover our separate existence as a nation, just so far as to disentitle us to the state assistance which any portion of a nation visited with such a calamity has a right to expect from the governing power.

While it took two more decades for a strong home rule movement to establish itself in Ireland, the legacy of the famine was to create a powerful folk memory of how Britain had failed its obligations under the union and simply abandoned Ireland to its fate.

Gray's excellent book should be required reading not just for students of the Irish famine, but for anyone interested in nineteenth-century Liberal politics. It is not just expertly researched with a clear mastery of sources, but offers a gripping narrative and convincing explanations for British government policy of the period. Although it deals mostly with decision-making at cabinet level it does not fall into the trap of focusing on high politics to the exclusion of the wider political context, including



newspaper comment and public opinion. If I have one criticism it is that having established the inseparability of the issues of land reform and famine relief, Gray proceeds to deal with each of these in separate chapters, which means that the reader can lose

sight of how the two threads interconnect. But that is just a small quibble about a book that really I cannot recommend too highly.

Iain Sharpe is a Liberal Democrat councillor in Watford.

Eloquence, energy and execution

David Bebbington & Roger Swift(eds.): *The Gladstone Centenary Essays* (Liverpool University Press, 2000)

Reviewed by **Tony Little**

In 1998 a conference was held at Chester College (part of the University of Liverpool), in commemoration of the centenary of Gladstone's death. This collection consists of eleven of the lectures delivered on that occasion, together with a very useful essay by David Bebbington reviewing the historiography of Gladstone. For those of us who attended the event these essays act as a useful reminder of what was said; they elaborate and provide the references for the arguments used. But do they provide a valuable read for those who are not specialists?

In his opening public lecture at the beginning of the conference (unfortunately not included) the late Colin Matthew, the editor of the bulk of the Gladstone Diaries,¹ argued that the diaries were the skeleton on which the body of Gladstone studies would hang. These essays represent a part of that body and try to convey something of the spirit and complexity of the man which no single biography, no matter how well written, can hope to capture. In a review of a biography of Pepys, Christopher Hill argues that the fascination of the Pepys' diary 'is that it does not put before us a single rounded personality but a broken bundle of mirrors. It is genuine because it is utterly inconsistent. Each of us can select his own Pepys'.² The issue for students of Gladstone is

slightly different. His diaries were not primarily an outlet for internal thoughts and discussions of private actions, revealing the fallible man in the way we know and love of Pepys. The examination of conscience, the incidental comments on events and people take second place to a log of correspondence sent and received, people met and books read. It is these bare bones that provide the clues, for those who know how to interpret them. More importantly, as these essays illustrate, Gladstone was not so obviously a mass of contradictions as Pepys. Complex, yes; multi-faceted, yes; but a personality whose wide interests interacted and reinforced each other.

Crucially, Gladstone came to politics by way of religion. Thwarted by his father in his efforts to pursue a career as an ordained minister, he determined to use his skill in politics to fortify the Church. This was simultaneously an enormous strength and a significant weakness. The weakness appeared early, as illustrated in the essays by Stewart Brown on the disruption of the Church of Scotland, and Eric Evans on Gladstone as Peel's pupil. Gladstone's support for High Church Anglicanism never wavered but, with Peel's guidance and by learning from his mistakes, he accommodated himself to the growing diversity of religious opinion in the

country and to the growing significance of the secular business of government. He also managed to learn before he gained a position that was important enough for his early wayward views to have done any damage. The strength his faith brought him was the moral purpose with which he was able to invest all his activities. Like Cromwell, he was doing God's work, though unlike Cromwell, his chosen weapons were eloquence and legislation. Clyde Binfield's essay shows how his moral fervour resonated with the middle class non-conformists who formed the backbone of Liberal support while Eugenio Biagini brings out the theological/philosophical strands that informed the framing of colonial policy in the 1880s.

Gladstone's hobbies of Homer and tree felling are hard to integrate but both are aspects of his immense intellectual and physical energy. It would be inconceivable for Gladstone to restrict himself to admiration of the beauties of Homeric Greek or even to testing his language skills by translation (his Tory rival Derby published an edition of Homer which is to be found in Gladstone's library at Hawarden). As the paper from David Bebbington shows, for Gladstone, Homer was a means of continuing political and religious controversy, an opportunity to argue against the philosophical radicalism of Grote and in defence of divine revelation. The result was the three volume *Homer & the Homeric Age* and later the slightly shorter one volume *Juventus Mundi* in which the Greek gods of mythology are presented as a memory of the divine promise of the coming of God in human form. Bebbington concludes that the growing humanity of Gladstone's Homeric studies reflected the changes in his political beliefs. 'The humanity that transfigured Olympus and the humanity required of British foreign policy were one and the same, a core value of Gladstonian Liberalism'.³

The largely political essays, which form the bulk of the collection, focus primarily on the mature statesman, characterised, in Roland Quinault's