Chapter 15

Ireland from the
Union to the Famine

With the Act of Union in 1800, England and Ireland in theory became parts of a single state. Yet the differences between England and Ireland were fundamental, and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland never really worked. While England (along with South Wales and Lowland Scotland) was industrializing and modernizing, Ireland remained a backward agricultural society. England was, however painfully, becoming the wealthiest and most progressive society in the world, but Ireland stood stagnant, mired in poverty, agrarian violence, and sectarian strife. It is safe to say that England, the predominant partner, never understood Irish problems the way the Irish did—never saw Ireland through Irish eyes. What was called “the Irish Question” thus became an intractable and frustrating set of issues for the English; what might have been called “the English Question” became an alternately maddening and demoralizing brick wall for the Irish. If the new state created in 1800 had worked, the attachment of Ireland to Britain could have been of enormous benefit to the mass of Irish people, but it did not, and the consequence was the greatest catastrophe in Irish history.

THE IRISH QUESTION

The so-called Irish Question of the early nineteenth century had three parts: political, religious, and economic. The political aspect arose from the fact that the Act of Union created a situation in which the great majority of the Irish people were disaffected from their government. The Anglo-Protestant ascendancy, approximately 15 to 20 percent of the Irish population (including the Ulster Presbyterians), thought that the Union was their sole protection, but most of the rest of the Irish regarded the Union as the source and symbol of their oppression. As Arthur Wellesley (later the duke of Wellington) said in 1807, “We have no strength here but our army. Ireland, in a view to military operations, must be viewed as an enemy’s country.” The Act of Union abolished the Irish Parliament and gave Ireland one hundred M.P.s (out of 658) in Parliament at Westminster. Catholics could vote but could not serve as members of Parliament. From 1801 to 1921, then, all major decisions on Irish policies were made by the British cabinet and Parliament in London, neither of which allowed the Irish much influence.
Likewise, Irish influence—that is, the influence of the Catholic majority of the population—did not propel the administrative machinery in Ireland. The Irish administration was headed by the lord lieutenant, usually a British nobleman who ruled from Dublin Castle, the symbol of Anglo-Protestant power. The main political figure was the chief secretary, a leading British politician who had to defend the government in the House of Commons as well as administer the country on a day-to-day basis. The administrative staff, the legal officers, the magistrates, and the judiciary through whom the lord lieutenant and chief secretary executed policy were all drawn from Irish Protestantism. Local government was carried out by Grand Juries selected by the sheriff of each county and by closed, nonelective corporations in the boroughs; both groups were exclusively Protestant.

The functions of government at first were restricted to preserving law and order. In the 1820s and 1830s, the scope of government in Ireland expanded to include public works, state education, and a Poor Law. In all of its functions, the Irish executive could depend little on the voluntary services of the aristocracy and gentry; hence the administration became more centralized than that in England. This tendency also suited the British attitude toward Ireland, which, despite the Union, held that Ireland was a strange and savage place. As Sir Robert Peel, chief secretary from 1812 to 1818, said, “I believe an honest despotic government would be by far the fittest government for Ireland.”

A kind of honest despotism, answerable to the British Parliament, is in fact what prevailed in Ireland. In order to control endemic agrarian violence as well as dangerous political movements, Parliament frequently resorted to “coercion” acts—laws suspending civil liberties from designated periods of time. Rarely was Ireland in the nineteenth century free from coercion. Because execution of the law was in Protestant hands, the Catholics did not trust the judiciary. In order to see that the law was enforced impartially, British administrators like Peel sometimes adopted measures that would have been unacceptable in England. For instance, they often resorted to “stipendiary magistrates”—magistrates employed by the central administration—instead of local J.P.s. Dublin Castle officials also used the army to enforce the law and even to collect tithes and carry out evictions of tenants for nonpayment of rent. The British army in Ireland consistently numbered between twenty thousand and forty thousand men and was backed by a yeomanry of another thirty-five thousand. Ireland thus in theory was part of the United Kingdom; in practice it was an occupied country.

The religious aspect of the Irish Question was clear: the established Church of Ireland, which was Anglican, represented only about 10 percent of the population. Nonconformists (mostly Ulster Presbyterians) composed another 8 to 10 percent; all the rest were Roman Catholics. Further, the Church of Ireland was top-heavy with a huge hierarchy: for 800,000 Anglicans, the Church in 1831 had four archbishops; eighteen bishops; numerous cathedrals, deans, and chapters; plus about 1,400 parish clergymen. Some Anglican parishes had not a single Protestant resident. This lavish establishment was supported by tithes, which all Irishmen, regardless of religion, had to pay. The Catholics hated the tithe, and in the early 1830s resistance to paying the tithe, backed by agrarian secret societies, spread
widely through southern Ireland. The government used large numbers of police and army troops to collect the tithe, and the resulting “tithe war” caused much bloodshed and ill-feeling.

Meanwhile, the Catholic church in Ireland was getting its own house in order. Having survived the penal laws, the Catholic church turned its attention to the twin problems of the population explosion and evangelical Protestant missionaries. The Catholic hierarchy undertook organizational reform, building of churches and chapels, renewal of discipline, and parochial education. By the 1830s, the church had a much firmer grip on the people. Moreover, that grip was exercised at the parish level by priests trained in the Catholic seminaries at Maynooth, Carlow, and elsewhere in Ireland. Whereas the older generation (who now held the top positions in the Irish hierarchy) had been trained abroad, the younger parish clergy (who had close daily contact with the people) were educated at home. One Protestant observer said that the Irish priests “displayed the bitterest feelings of the partisan and the grossest habits of the peasant.” This is a prejudiced view, no doubt, but the Catholic clergyman, who lived in a small world dominated by the Protestant squire, parson, and the tithe collector, did tend to be highly political. To him, Irish patriotism and Catholicism were one and the same.

The economic dimension of the Irish Question was simply that Ireland was very poor. The Irish in the first half of the nineteenth century were caught in a “poverty trap,” in which poverty itself—low incomes, primitive markets, and a low rate of capital formation—defeated every impetus for economic growth. Moreover, the economic obstacles to prosperity were reinforced by seemingly immovable political and social conditions. Politics, society, and economics fed on each other to make a vicious circle of instability, insecurity, and stagnation.

To begin with, there was, as we have seen, no industrialization in Ireland except in Ulster. The Union had envisioned a single free-trade area for the British Isles, but when free trade was actually enacted in 1824, it had severe consequences for the Irish economy. The cotton textile industry centered in Belfast was protected by tariffs until 1824, when Huskisson and the Tory government insisted on free trade within the United Kingdom. Thereafter, the Ulster cotton industry was destroyed by competition from British mills. Belfast was able to switch back to its old staple, linen; however, in the rest of Ireland, British machine-made goods ruined the most important cottage industry, domestic weaving. Given the comparative attractiveness of the burgeoning English and Scottish industrial sector, no one wanted to invest in new industries in Ireland. There was little capital in Ireland, and few English or Scottish investors wanted to transfer their capital into the Emerald Isle. Outside of Ulster, therefore, the great majority of the Irish people became more dependent than ever on agriculture.

Irish farming in the first half of the century was able to increase its production, but it remained inefficient compared to English agriculture, now in the full tide of agricultural revolution. In Ireland, there was a steady shift of land from tillage to pasturage but not much improvement of farming techniques. The problem once again was lack of investment. In order to improve farming, some part of Irish society had to invest in the reorganization of the land, new crops, fertilizer, scientific
breeding, and so on. But no one did. Landless laborers and cottiers (cottagers) were too poor to do so, and tenant farmers were either too poor or too insecure of their holdings. Tenants feared that if they made improvements, their rents would go up. Only in Ulster, where “Ulster custom” prevailed, were tenants entitled to compensation for improvements that they made on their land; not surprisingly, in Ulster tenants were more progressive farmers, and landlord-tenant relations were more cooperative than in Leinster, Munster, and Connacht. The Irish landlords had the money to invest, and a few in fact tried to improve their estates, but the results inevitably involved evictions of “excess” tenants and considerable violence. Few landlords viewed improvements as a good bargain. They were alienated from their tenants and laborers by religion, culture, and mutual antagonism. The landlords were understandably fearful of the chronic agrarian terrorism that afflicted the countryside. Many were absenteeees in England; others opted to spend their incomes on consumer pleasures—fine houses, horses, dogs, entertainment, and drink. What most Irish landlords wanted from their estates was the rent, the collection of which they left to bailiffs and “middlemen.” Neither investment nor paternalism had any attraction for them.

The great majority of the Irish people still depended on the land for a living. Upwards of two-thirds of all occupied people worked in farming. They labored on the land but did not own it. In England, the tendency was for landholdings to grow in size, but in Ireland, the rapid increase in the population and the lack of alternative employment put enormous pressure on the land. By subdivision, tenancies became smaller and smaller, as did the plots of land rented by cottiers and wage laborers. A royal commission in 1845 found that to sustain a family of five, a farm in Ireland had to be between 6 and 10 acres, but by the 1840s, 45 percent of all holdings were below 5 acres, and another 37 percent were between 5 and 15 acres.

Meanwhile, competition for holdings and a general decline of agricultural prices were pushing rentals (in terms of tenants’ purchasing power) up. Arrears of rent were common, as were evictions for nonpayment of rent. The Irish peasantry tried to defend themselves from rent increases and eviction by forming secret societies, which engaged in intimidation not only of landlords but also of tenants who dared bid for a holding from which a family has been evicted. Whiteboys, Whitefeet, Ribbonmen, Rockites, and the like spread widely, especially from the 1820s. Their tactics consisted of intimidation, mutilation of cattle, and assassination. Most observers thought that the violence did protect the peasantry from predatory landlords, but it also contributed significantly to the vicious circle of poverty and stagnation.

The hard-pressed Irish population became even more dependent on the potato. Generally, the Irish tenants and cottiers produced grain, pigs, and cattle, either on their own holdings or on someone else’s, to pay the rent, but they grew potatoes to feed themselves. The poorer the region (mainly in the West) the greater the dependency on the potato. By the 1840s, one-third of all land under tillage was devoted to potatoes, and upwards of half the population ate little else. Travelers in Ireland even noticed fewer pigs living in the peasants’ huts, not because standards of
hygiene had gone up but because fewer cottiers and laborers could afford them. Cash money had little part to play in the life of the ordinary peasant; hence there was at best a primitive market system and no means of attracting alternative foodstuffs into Ireland. Localized famine was common wherever the potato crop failed. This was a setting for disaster.

DANIEL O'CONNELL AND CATHOLIC EMANCIPATION

It would seem obvious that Ireland in the early nineteenth century was ripe for revolution, or at least a powerful movement against the Union. But in the opening decades of the century, the Irish political scene was quiet. Most Protestants had turned against patriotic politics and looked to the Union as their salvation. The small Catholic middle class had no way to revoke the Act of Union. The demoralized masses were inert, and the horrors of 1798 were fresh in everyone's mind. Thus when the youthful Robert Emmet and the vestiges of the United Irishmen staged a rising in Dublin in 1803, it was abortive. Emmet's rebellion came to nothing except his own execution and the making of another martyr for the revolutionary strain in Irish nationalism. Independence or autonomy for Ireland was out of the question.

Full civil and political rights for Catholics were another matter. The Younger Pitt, it will be remembered, meant to include Catholic emancipation as part of a package with the Union. Many English and Scottish Whigs as well as radicals adopted the issue. In Ireland, middle-class and professional Catholics continued to work for emancipation, partly on principle and partly on the hope that they would benefit directly from public office or the prestige of a seat in Parliament. In the years between 1800 and 1823, however, the Irish Catholic leadership was divided and ineffective. The divisions had to do with the questions of "safeguards" insisted on by the British as the price of emancipation: first, state control over appointments of Catholic bishops; and second, state payment of the Catholic clergy. Presumably, these safeguards would ensure the loyalty of the Catholic church, and many upperclass English and Irish Catholics were content to accept them. Other Irish Catholics, however, including most priests and some bishops, would not; consequently, the movement was paralyzed.

This situation was transformed by Daniel O'Connell, who was to be one of the two great leaders of Irish nationalism in the nineteenth century. O'Connell (1775–1847) was the heir of an old Catholic gentry family of County Kerry. Educated abroad in French Catholic schools, O'Connell read for the bar in London and then became a successful and popular lawyer in Dublin. While studying in London, he became a deist and a Benthamite. The deism he soon abandoned when he returned to Catholicism, but the Benthamism he retained. He was thus one of a certain European type—a liberal Catholic—but one who also was a paternalist landlord, fluent in Gaelic. O'Connell was a passionate Irish patriot and was strongly opposed to the Union. At the same time, his firsthand experience of the French Revolution in 1791–1793 and of the Irish rebellion of 1798 gave him a permanent abhorrence of revolutionary violence. His reaction to the Wexford rising reflected a profound
insight: “Good God! What a brute man becomes when ignorant and oppressed! Oh liberty, what horrors are perpetuated in thy name! May every virtuous revolutionary remember the horrors of Wexford.”

As a Catholic barrister practicing in the Irish law courts, O’Connell was intensely aware of the civil disabilities suffered by Catholics. Yet he refused to accept emancipation with the “safeguards,” on grounds that religious liberty should not be won at the price of shackling the church. His goal was to win emancipation without the safeguards; his strategy was to harness a mass popular agitation to a constitutional parliamentary movement. In 1823 he helped found a new Catholic Association and the next year opened it to ordinary tenant farmers by reducing the membership fee to a penny a month. This was a stroke of genius, for it enabled the Catholic Association to tap the energy of the tenants and to collect thousands of pounds a year for its political fund. Moreover, it mobilized the parish priests, who were held in great esteem in the Catholic communities and who happily urged their parishioners each Sunday to join the Association.

O’Connell’s Catholic Association was the first modern political organization in Britain. Why did it succeed in appealing to the Irish peasantry, who, after all, would not personally benefit from Catholic emancipation? One reason was that O’Connell had the gifts of uncanny eloquence and a magical voice. He was a born demagogue, who by his forceful denunciations of British rule acted out the wishes and dreams of his mass audiences. He spoke to the people from within their traditions and appealed to their sense of independence and pride. At the same time, O’Connell made the agitation seem dangerous to the authorities, because, while always eschewing revolution, he deliberately referred to the violence that might occur if Catholic emancipation were not granted. In British eyes, there loomed behind O’Connell the shadowy nightmare of popular revolution.

In 1826, the Catholic Association turned to direct electoral pressure. In the counties, approximately eighty-five thousand Catholic tenants had the vote as forty-shilling freeholders. Traditionally, they yielded to intimidation and voted with their landlords. But the Catholic Association and the parish priests were able to persuade the tenants in Waterford and five other constituencies to defy their landlords and vote for parliamentary candidates supporting Catholic emancipation. In 1828, O’Connell himself dared stand for Parliament in County Clare. He won decisively and thereby presented Wellington and Peel, the leaders of the Tory government, with a hard choice: whether to give in to pressure for emancipation or to reject O’Connell’s election (and all the others that were sure to follow) and use military force against the rising that almost everyone expected to be the result. As we saw in Chapter 14, Wellington and Peel gave in. In 1829, they carried Catholic emancipation but exacted a stiff price: the Catholic Emancipation Act allowed Catholics to sit in Parliament and to hold all but a few Crown offices, but it disfranchised the Irish forty-shilling freeholders, about 80 percent of the Irish electorate. O’Connell struggled against the disfranchisement but finally agreed to it because both the English Whigs and the upper-class Irish Catholics supported it and undermined O’Connell’s resistance. Otherwise, Catholic emancipation was a great victory for
O'Connell, for the act opened all public offices (except for an insignificant few) and Parliament to Catholics, and it included no “safeguards.”

O'Connell took his seat in the House of Commons in 1830 and for some years enjoyed unparalleled popularity—even adulation—in Ireland. Many Irish Protestants gloomily predicted the end of their ascendancy, fearing that democracy, disestablishment, and the confiscation of property would follow; many peasants joyfully expected the same outcome. In the short run both were wrong. Still, O'Connell's triumph in the campaign for Catholic emancipation was of immense significance. For one thing, it taught the Irish people that they could win by demands and agitation what they could not by reason and persuasion. For another, it affirmed the importance of priests in national politics. Most important, O'Connell's strategy welded Irish nationalism to Catholicism. Some later Irish patriots who preferred a nonsectarian nationalism encompassing all Irish men and women regardless of their religious denomination have regretted this feature of O'Connell's legacy. It is ironic that O'Connell, a liberal Catholic devoted to religious toleration, should have been responsible for this step in Irish nationalism, but it is hard to see how he could have acted otherwise. The reality of Ireland under the Union inevitably made unionists of Irish Protestants and Irish patriots of Irish Catholics.

REPEAL AND YOUNG IRELAND

O'Connell had always intended Catholic emancipation to be the first step toward his ultimate objective: repeal of the Act of Union. He was neither a Republican nor a Separatist, thus his constitutional ideal for Ireland and Britain was a dual monarchy: “I desire no social revolution, no social change,” he said. “In short, salutary restoration without revolution, an Irish Parliament, British connection, one King, two legislatures.” But he faced total opposition from the British Parliament on this issue. Not only were the Conservatives unalterably opposed to repeal, but so also were his former Whig and radical allies. When he first raised the question in Parliament (in 1834), he was defeated by 532 to 39. His support included, besides his own repeal party, only one English M.P., and that one was none other than the future Chartist Feargus O'Connor, who was as much an Irish nationalist as he was a democrat.

Given this blanket opposition, O'Connell thought it wise to win from Parliament whatever help he could for the Irish people. Though the Whigs were as touchy on law and order in Ireland as the most unbending Tories, at least they included Ireland in their program of parliamentary reform. Hence the Irish Reform Act of 1832 restored many leaseholders to the electorate, enfranchised the ten-pound householders in the boroughs, and gave Ireland five extra seats. O'Connell hoped for additional reforms from them. In 1833, the Whig government reorganized the Anglican Irish Church, abolishing ten bishoprics and reducing the income of the others. In 1835, therefore, O'Connell made an alliance with the Whigs in the so-called Lichfield House Compact.
By this agreement, O’Connell and his repealers acted with the Liberal parliamentary alliance until 1841 and put repeal on the back burner. The Whig alliance was for O’Connell only moderately successful. The Whig government in 1838 tried to solve the problem of Irish tithes, but against ferocious opposition they were able only to convert the tithe into a rent-charge in effect collected by the landlords. In 1839, the Whigs imposed on Ireland the dubious gift of a Poor Law system, complete with workhouses and the “less-eligibility” principle. In 1840, a reform of Irish municipal corporations was passed.

The most beneficial aspect of O’Connell’s alliance with the Whigs was a change in the tone of the Dublin Castle administration. The key figure in this administrative reform was Thomas Drummond, undersecretary from 1835 to 1840. He was determined to enforce the law without the usual prejudice in favor of the Protestants, and he opened the Irish civil service and judiciary to Catholics. He even evicted from the bench the more bigoted Protestants. Drummond took strong action against secret terrorist societies, but for once also brought pressure on the Protestant Orange Order and so broke its political power. Drummond understood the economic roots of agrarian crime and admonished the landlords that “property has its duties as well as its rights.” In sum, Drummond did more than any other British official before 1870 to win the confidence of the Catholic majority.

O’Connell meanwhile decided to renew the campaign for repeal of the Union. Drummond died in 1840, and the Whig government was on its last legs. There was no prospect of allying with the Conservative leader, known to the Irish as “Orange Peel.” In 1840, therefore, O’Connell founded the Loyal National Repeal Association,
hoping to win repeal by the same tactics as in 1828–1929: parliamentary pressure backed by a massive popular agitation in Ireland.

The moment seemed ripe for repeal, in part because of the inspired journalism of a small number of romantic journalists called “Young Ireland.” In 1842, three young men devoted to the cultural as well as political autonomy of Ireland founded The Nation newspaper. They were Thomas Davis (a Protestant barrister), Charles Gavan Duffy (an Ulster Catholic), and John Blake Dillon (a southern Catholic). Their policy was repeal of the Union, but their goal was renewal of the Irish identity based on old Irish cultural traditions and a potent mythology of Irish heroes and martyrs. They wanted the Irish to be more than “West Britain.” Their national ideal was nonsectarian, and their propaganda was lofty and effective. By 1843, The Nation had a readership of more than 250,000.

O’Connell designated 1843 as “the repeal year.” He staged a series of giant open-air gatherings dubbed “monster meetings” to demonstrate the depth of Irish feeling. Some of these monster meetings were attended by more than 100,000 people. O’Connell spoke at the meetings in a crescendo of violent rhetoric. To cautious people in England and Ireland he seemed to be threatening revolution. In June 1843, for example, he warned his audience that “you may have the alternative to live as slaves or die as freemen.” By the autumn of 1843, the political temperature of Ireland was at its peak, and the British, already concerned about Chartism, felt embattled.

The problem for O’Connell was that he was deliberately bluffing and had no alternate plan should the British government simply defy him. And defy him they did. Prime minister Peel and his Conservatives, as well as nearly all the Liberals, simply would not countenance repeal of the Union. In 1834 Peel had declared: “I feel and know that the Repeal must lead to dismemberment of this great empire; must make Great Britain a fourth-rate power of Europe, and Ireland a savage wilderness.” What repeal ran up against, then, was British nationalism, the deep British mistrust of Catholicism, and British certainty that autonomy for Ireland would destroy the empire. Peel said in 1843: “Deprecating as I do all war, above all, civil war, yet there is no alternative which I do not think preferable to the dismemberment of this empire.” In October 1843, Peel banned what was to be the biggest monster meeting and summoned troops to enforce that ban. O’Connell, who had always loathed violence and bloodshed, canceled the meeting. Even so, the government arrested him shortly afterward and convicted him of conspiracy. O’Connell was imprisoned for five months and emerged a more cautious and weary man. The repeal agitation was finished.

THE GREAT FAMINE, 1845–1850

Repeal was in any case soon made irrelevant to the Irish people. Famine became the reality, and suffering was the everyday experience of millions of Irish men, women, and children. In the autumn of 1845, the Irish potato crop was heavily damaged by a fungus now recognized as phytophthora infestans. The blight
turned most of the potatoes into a foul mass of putrefying pulp. Dependent as they were on the potato, a large segment of the Irish population suffered grievously through the winter of 1845–1846; and then the crop of 1846 failed utterly. The winter of 1846–1847 brought widespread starvation and disease. Many peasant families ate their seed potatoes; therefore, although the blight did less damage in 1847, the harvest was too small. In 1848, the potato crop failed totally again and only began to improve in 1849. By 1850, the blight had largely disappeared, but in the meantime famine had made a horror of life in Ireland.

The impact of the Great Famine is shown by simple population statistics. In 1841, the Irish population stood at 8.2 million people, and by its natural rate of increase would have risen to about 9 million in 1851. In actuality, the census of 1851 found only 6.5 million, leaving a gap of about 2.5 million between the expected and the actual population. Of these, about 1 million were emigrants; the rest, about 1.5 million people, composed the casualties of the Great Famine. Some died of hunger, but most died of famine-related diseases like typhus, relapsing fever, and dysentery. These 1.5 million dead amounted to nearly 20 percent of the Irish population of 1841. For comparison, it should be noted that Ireland lost more people because of the Famine than all of Britain did in any war between 1688 and the present.

The suffering of the Irish people during the Famine is incalculable. The poorest elements in the society—laborers and cottiers—suffered most, but the small tenant farmers also faced terrible deprivation. None of these classes had any reserves of wealth or possessions with which to buy food. Ireland, ironically, con-
continued to produce food throughout the famine years and indeed to export food (grain, cattle, and dairy products) to England, Scotland and Wales. But the peasants who grew those foodstuffs to pay their rent had nothing left after the rent with which to buy food. Thousands fell into arrears in their rents anyway, and many were evicted. The roads and pathways of the country were crowded with evicted families and beggars; workhouses and hospitals were filled to overflowing. Reports by careful observers of the misery of the people are numerous and heartbreaking: reports of women and children starving; of bodies too numerous to be buried; of dogs eating corpses. Here is a passage from one letter written by a magistrate to the duke of Wellington:

I accordingly went on the 15th instant [December 1846] to Skibbereen. . . . I was surprised to find the wretched hamlet apparently deserted. I entered some of the hovels to ascertain the cause, and the scenes which presented themselves were such as no tongue or pen can convey the slightest idea of. In the first, six famished and ghastly skeletons, to all appearances dead, were huddled in a corner on some filthy straw, their sole covering what seemed a ragged horsecloth, their wretched legs hanging about, naked above the knees. I approached with horror, and found by a low moaning they were alive—they were in fever, four children, a woman and what had once been a man.

The suffering of the emigrants was scarcely less. Emigration was an old story in Irish history: approximately 1.75 million emigrated between 1780 and 1845, most of them choking the streets and alleys of Britain’s worst industrial slums. Now, most went either directly to North America or to Liverpool, where they found passage to Canada or the United States. In both cases, the crossing was hazardous and miserable. Many of the ships that were called into the passenger service were inadequate. Some sank, on others the mortality rate ranged from a third to a half. For instance, the Agnes sailed in 1847: of her 427 passengers, only 150 survived. Even when they arrived in the New World, the Irish emigrants faced severe hardships. They were rural people but were forced practically overnight to become urban dwellers, and at the bottom rank of society to boot. They were discriminated against by the Anglo-Saxon (and Protestant) American elite. Over time, the Irish in America learned to protect themselves by building self-sufficiency in their neighborhoods through Catholic parishes, parochial schools, and machine politics. This experience nurtured their Irish identity, and the Irish immigrant communities in America became hotbeds of intensely anti-British Irish nationalism.

The British response to the Famine was horribly inadequate, both because of inability and because of disinclination to help the Irish. Peel, who was prime minister when the Famine began, acted energetically. In November 1845, he had his agents in America buy £100,000 of Indian corn (maize) to be distributed in Ireland. He did not mean to feed the people but to keep food prices down by selling the corn cheaply to local relief organizations. He also helped set up committees of Irish landlords to collect charitable funds and distribute food. He set the Board of Works to constructing roads in Ireland as a means of providing employment. Finally, Peel
undertook repeal of the Corn Law, his theory being that if trade were free, cheap grain would flow into Ireland. As we have seen in the previous chapter, this was a costly decision for Peel. It split the Conservative party, and the anti-Peel malcontents joined the Whigs in voting Peel out of office. As far as Ireland was concerned, free trade in grain did not work: the impoverished Irish people could not generate any economic demand for food. Whether Peel could or would have done more than the Whigs for Ireland when the Famine worsened, one will never know, for Peel never returned to office and died in 1850.

Peel's successor as prime minister was Lord John Russell, scion of one of the grandest Whig families and a hero of 1832. Unfortunately for the Irish, Russell and his principal administrators were committed to a narrow version of private enterprise, which in the case of Ireland could not work. The actual day-to-day execution of British governmental policy was assumed by Sir Charles Trevelyan, assistant secretary to the Treasury, who was even more doctrinaire than Russell. Russell and Trevelyan were forced by events into intervening in Ireland, but they struggled incessantly to minimize the government's role. Their actions thus were severely limited by a fourfold policy: (1) the Irish people must not be “demoralized” by receiving too much assistance; (2) Irish poverty must be supported by Irish property; (3) no public works must be carried out that might benefit private individuals; and (4) the government must not sell food below market prices.

This policy was cruelly irrational in view of the Irish realities, but British officials in London understood little of what was really happening in Ireland. One government agent in Ireland wrote Trevelyan: “You cannot answer the cry of want by a quotation from political economy.” But the government stuck to its theories. “It must be thoroughly understood,” Russell wrote in 1846, “that we cannot feed the people.” At first, the Russell government put its faith in public works; then, in early 1847, it shifted to direct outdoor relief through soup kitchens; and finally, from mid-1847, it resorted to the Poor Law. At one point in 1847, the soup kitchens were feeding three million people a day, but the government's best efforts were always too little too late. Each phase of the official policy was overwhelmed by the sheer numbers of starving and diseased people and undermined by the inability of the debt-ridden Irish property owners to pay the necessary taxes. What was needed was a massive mobilization of the wealth of Britain as if it were wartime, but the effort was never made.

Voluntary charitable efforts by the British were, however, impressive, if necessarily inadequate by themselves for the task at hand. Various relief organizations were set up, most notably the British Relief Association. They raised funds in England and Ireland for soup kitchens and infirmaries. The Quakers distinguished themselves in this voluntary effort, not least by sending many Friends to Ireland, where they not only set up the first soup kitchens but also reported back to England about the true state of affairs in Ireland. The established Church of Ireland also did what it could to relieve distress, though some Anglican clergymen demanded conversion as the price of food. The actions of this minority in the Church of Ireland left a legacy of bitterness in the Catholic peasants that lasted long after the Famine was over.
Increased bitterness between the Irish and English was in fact one of the important consequences of the Great Famine. The Irish could not help feeling that the British had let them starve even though Britain was the wealthiest nation on earth, and that the British would never have let a million Englishmen or Scotsmen perish when food was available. (In fact, the potato crop in the western Highlands and islands of Scotland also failed, and Highland crofters suffered as grievously as the Irish tenants.) The Irish survivors of the Famine at home and abroad repeatedly expressed their bitterness toward England in violence and bloodshed as well as in song and verse. The English, on the other hand, in many cases tended to blame the victims for their troubles, concluding that the Irish were an incompetent, irresponsible, and even a racially inferior people. Trevelyan, for example, decided that “the great evil” in Ireland was not famine but “the selfish, perverse, and turbulent character of the people.” The Conservative Quarterly Review put it this way: “...all of the civilization, arts, comfort, wealth that Ireland enjoys she owes exclusively to England...all her absurdities, errors, misery she owes herself.”

The famine was the great watershed in Irish economic and social history. The immediate demographic consequence we have already seen; the Irish population never recovered to its pre-1845 level. Moreover, the Famine began to roll back the subdivision of land. In 1841, 45 percent of all agricultural holdings in Ireland were between 1 and 5 acres; in 1851, only 16 percent were. The total number of holdings declined. As consolidation of holdings slowly went forward, so also did cereal farming and cattle grazing. Small family farms worked by tenants became the norm; furthermore, the new but profound concern of the tenants with protecting the family farm caused a rise in the average age at marriage and a corresponding decline in the birth rate. Unfortunately, “landlordism” (the predatory and unimproving attitude of Irish landlords) itself survived. Many of the old landowners lost their estates to savvy investors and middlemen during the Famine. These new owners, however, proved to be just as devoted as their predecessors to collecting rents without providing agricultural leadership. Here were the roots of rural tension and violence in Ireland for the next fifty years.

YOUNG IRELAND AND 1848

The relations between O’Connell and Young Ireland, which were never very close, cracked under the stress of the Famine. Part of the problem was generational: by 1845, O’Connell was seventy years old, whereas the Young Irelanders were in their twenties and thirties. Part of the problem also was temperamental: O’Connell was a seasoned and wily politician, whereas they were romantic intellectuals. Finally, part of the problem was tactical. After the failure of repeal in 1843 and the return of the Whigs to office in 1846, O’Connell thought it best to work with the Whigs in order to get what he could for Ireland. The Young Irelanders, however, preferred to stick defiantly to repeal. As early as 1845, O’Connell and Young Ireland had disagreed over a proposal by Peel to establish three nondenominational colleges in Ireland. In the interests of Catholicism, O’Connell denounced the colleges...
as “Godless,” but the Young Irelanders accepted them in the interests of a nonsectarian Ireland. By mid-1846, the repeal movement had split wide open.

This dispute was aggravated by the failure of the Whigs to deal adequately with the Famine. The final break of July 1846 came, nominally at least, over the issue of whether Irish nationalists were ever justified in using force in their struggle. The Nation had become more militant because of the Famine. One editorial declared: “Better a little blood-letting to show that there is blood, than a patient dragging of chains and pining beneath them slowly for generations leading to the belief that all spirit is fled.” O’Connell responded firmly that “the greatest political advantages are not worth one drop of blood.” The Young Irelanders at that point were not aiming at revolution any more than were the O’Connellites, but the Young Irelanders as romantics would not give up the Irish revolutionary tradition. Early in 1847, they withdrew from the Repeal Association and founded their own organization, the Irish Confederation.

From that moment on, some Young Irelanders slipped hesitantly into a revolutionary posture. O’Connell, by then fatally ill, made one last pathetic appeal to Parliament for help against the Famine and then died on the way to Rome. Young Ireland became more radical. One of the radicalizing influences was James Fintan Lalor, who joined Young Ireland in 1847. He emphasized the rights of the tenants against those of the landlords and urged that “the national movement” temporarily be put aside for a tenant-right agitation. Everyone recognized that in Ireland tenant-right was a socially explosive issue. Another Young Irelander, John Mitchel, took up Lalor’s ideas and began to combine them with advocacy of physical force. He wrote, “It is indeed full time that we cease to whine and begin to act . . . Good heavens, to think that we should go down without a struggle.”

Despite the advent of such views within the Young Ireland movement, there was no overt action toward a rising until early 1848. The event that precipitated the Young Ireland conspiracy was the outbreak of the European revolutions of 1848, first in France and then in Austria, Prussia, and Hungary. Mitchel and some other Young Irelanders seized the moment to call for an Irish republic—a step far beyond repeal of the Union. These Young Irelanders sent a delegation to Paris and established relations with the British Chartists. Once again, as in 1796–1798, the British government faced a dangerous combination of British radicals and Irish nationalists.

Unfortunately for them, the Young Irelanders made poor revolutionaries. Government spies penetrated their organization. The Irish leaders failed utterly to coordinate their rising with the Chartists. Mitchel was arrested and convicted of sedition in March of 1848, and in July Parliament suspended habeas corpus in Ireland. Aware that the government would soon arrest them, a few Young Irelanders set out to raise the peasantry of south-central Ireland in revolt. The leader was William Smith O’Brien, a chivalrous Protestant landlord who completely lacked the ruthlessness required of a successful revolutionary. The peasants were much too beaten down by the Famine to respond; they had no arms and no organization, and their priests urged them not to rebel. The “rising” of 1848 thus ended in a miser-
able scuffle in a cabbage patch in County Tipperary. The leaders were arrested, convicted, and transported to Australia.

Tragic-comic as it was, the Young Ireland rising of 1848 nevertheless had considerable significance. The Young Irelanders’ romantic and nonsectarian brand of nationalism and their refusal to renounce the revolutionary heritage inspired many later nationalists. Their defiant gesture in 1848 helped emphasize to Irish nationalists the notion that revolutionary acts, no matter how hopeless, can be morally elevating. The connection made by Young Ireland between tenant rights and nationalism, like their rejection of English utilitarian and laissez-faire principles, tended to radicalize subsequent Irish nationalist movements. Irish politicians after 1848 turned for a time to conventional parliamentary tactics, but the idealistic and extremist strain typified by Young Ireland did not die out.

**Suggested Reading**


296 Part III The Rise of Victorian Society

The disintegration of Chartism, the end of the Famine, and the collapse of Young Ireland—all of which occurred in 1848—marked the end of more than a half-century of social and political turmoil. In Britain there followed a period of relative prosperity and social harmony. Poverty, urban misery, and class divisions did not disappear, but economic conditions improved compared to what had gone before, and social conflict was channeled into workable institutions. An atmosphere of confidence bathed the society. This atmosphere was reinforced by English preeminence within the British Isles and by British preeminence on the seas and in the world markets. The result was what Professor E. L. Burn has called “the Age of Equipoise”—the two decades of the 1850s and 1860s, when social and cultural forces came into balance, when forces of continuity seemed to balance those of change, and when forces of conservatism seemed to balance those of progress.

The mid-Victorian years from 1850 to 1870 were the high noon of Victorianism. On the basis of relative security, prosperity, and social harmony, the high culture of Victorianism flourished and blossomed. Later, Modernists of the twentieth century were to react strongly against Victorian culture, and “Victorianism” still carries negative connotations of bourgeois complacency and hypocrisy. This hostility toward Victorian culture fails to give credit to the Victorians either for their achievements or for the sincerity of their attempts to deal with difficult problems. In culture, as in society, Victorianism was a balance of dynamic forces—conservative and progressive, believing and doubting, romantic and utilitarian. Victorian culture was in fact one of the high points of modern society.

**ECONOMIC STABILITY**

Prosperity, or at least the illusion of it, was the foundation of the mid-Victorian equipoise. Britain in the 1850s and 1860s was the greatest nation on earth because of its economic power. The British headstart in commercial and industrial expansion put them far in advance of other countries. In 1850, for example, the British produced about 28 percent of the world’s industrial output, including