

### 13.8 British Response to the Great Irish Famine

**Source:** Peter Gray, *The Irish Famine*, (1995)

**Background:** Ireland was part of Great Britain, so it was the responsibility of the British Parliament and Cabinet to respond to conditions created by the potato blight. During the Great Famine, British policy was widely debated. In Charles Trevelyan, who was the Assistant Secretary of the Treasury and responsible for funding famine relief, and the *London Times*, explained British famine policy.

#### Questions

- 1-. Why did Burke and Trevelyan believe that it would be a mistake for government and the rich to provide for the poor in times of scarcity?
2. Why is British relief policy based on the idea that help for the poor is “like a canker into the moral health and physical prosperity of the people”?
3. Why does Trevelyan argue that effective relief programs must be local?
4. Trevelyan believes that Ireland was being treated fairly as an equal part of Great Britain. What is your opinion? Explain..
5. Trevelyan argued that the potato blight was a God-granted opportunity to integrate Ireland and England if the government pursued the correct policies. In your opinion, would a laissez-faire approach benefit Ireland either in the short term or the long term? Explain your answer?
6. Why did *The London Times* object to government relief programs?
7. What attitude about the Irish was behind their position?
8. Why did *The London Times* regard “the potato blight as a blessing”?
9. Why did *The London Times* blame the Irish landowners for this calamity?

A. In 1846, Charles Trevelyan, Assistant Secretary of the British Treasury, distributed copies of a pamphlet written by British statesman Edmund Burke in 1800. In the pamphlet, *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity*, Burke argued that people should rely on self-help during times of scarcity, and that government should pursue a laissez-faire policy.

“Years of scarcity or plenty, do not come alternately or at short intervals, but in pretty long cycles and irregularly. In my opinion, there is no way of preventing this evil which goes to the destruction of all our agriculture, and of that part of our internal commerce which touches our agriculture the most nearly, as well as the safety and very being of Government, but manfully to resist, speculative or practical, that it is within the competence of Government or even of the rich to supply to the poor, those necessaries which it has pleased the Divine Providence for a while to with-hold from them. We, the people, ought to be made sensible, that it is not in breaking the laws of commerce, which are the laws of nature, and consequently the laws of God, that we are to place our hope of softening the divine displeasure to remove any calamity under which we suffer, or which hangs over us.”

B. In *The Irish Crisis* (1848), Charles Trevelyan defended British relief policy. Trevelyan argued that effective relief must remain local and that Ireland was being treated fairly as a part of Great Britain.

“Ireland is not the only country which would have been thrown off its balance by the attraction of “public money.” This false principle eats like a canker into the moral health and physical prosperity of the people. All classes ‘make a poor mouth,’ as it is expressively called in Ireland. They conceal their advantages, exaggerate their difficulties, and relax their exertions. The cottier does not sow his holding, the proprietor does not employ his poor in improving his estate, because by doing so they would disentitle themselves to their ‘share of the relief.’ The common wealth suffers both by the lavish consumption and the diminished production.

There is only one way in which the relief of the destitute ever has been, or ever will be, conducted consistently with the general welfare, and that is by making it a local charge. Those who know how to discriminate between the different claims for relief, then become actuated by a powerful motive to use that knowledge aright. They are spending their own money. At the same time, those who have the means of employing the people in reproductive works have the strongest inducement given them to do so. The struggle now is to keep the poor off the rates, and if their labour only replaces the cost of their food, it is cheaper than having to maintain them in perfect idleness.

Our humble but sincere conviction is, that the appointed time of Ireland’s regeneration is at last come. For several centuries we were in a state of open warfare with the native Irish, who were treated as foreign enemies, and were not admitted to the privileges and civilizing influences of English law, even when they most desired it. Now, thank God, we are in a different position; and although many waves of disturbance must pass over us before that

troubled sea can entirely subside, and time must be allowed for morbid habits to give place to a more healthy action, England and Ireland are, with one great exception, the subject to equal laws; and so far as the maladies of Ireland are traceable to political causes, nearly every practical remedy has been applied.

The deep and inveterate root of social evil remained, and this has been laid bare by a direct stroke of an all-wise and all-merciful Providence. God grant that the generation to which this great opportunity has been offered may rightly perform its part, and that we may not relax our efforts until Ireland fully participates in the social health and physical prosperity of Great Britain.”

C. The influential newspaper, *The London Times*, strongly supported British relief policy. In this article, from September 22, 1846, *The London Times* condemned the “preference of the Irish for relief over labour.”

“Human agency is now denounced as instrumental in adding to the calamity inflicted by Heaven. It is no longer submission to Providence, but a murmur against the Government. The potatoes were blighted by a decree from on high, but labour is defrauded by the machinations of earthly power. Such are the thanks that a Government gets for attempting to palliate great afflictions and satisfy corresponding demands by an inevitable but a ruinous beneficence.

The Government provided work for a people who love it not. It made this the absolute condition of relief. It know that the [people] would at all times rather be idle than toil. It saw distinctly the prospect of more than half a nation becoming complacently dependent upon specious alms. There was but one way to avoid a calamity compared with which the potato blight is a trivial thing. This was to enjoin that work, slovenly and sluggishly performed -- as the Government work was sure to be -- should procure subsistence to the peasant, but nothing more. The Government was required to ward off starvation, not to pamper indolence; its duty was to encourage industry, not to stifle it; to stimulate others to give employment, not outbid them, or drive them from the labour market.

There are ingredients in the Irish character which must be modified and corrected before either individuals or Governments can hope to raise the general condition of the people. And this change cannot be effected until the landholders and squireens exert themselves. Had the smaller gentry resident in Ireland done their duty to their tenants and dependents, had they set the example of attention to their properties and improvement of their estates, the Irish would long ago have repudiated the potato. Neglected by others, they neglected themselves. Hence the universal prostration of self-complacent poverty and unrepining discontent.

For our parts, we regard the potato blight as a blessing. When the Celts once cease to be potatophagi, they must become carnivorous. With the taste of meats will grow the appetite for them; with the appetite, the readiness to earn them. With this will come steadiness, regularity, and perseverance; unless, indeed, the growth of these qualities be impeded by the blindness of Irish patriotism, short-sighted indifference of petty landlords, or the random recklessness of Government benevolence.

Nothing will strike so deadly a blow, not only at the dignity of the Irish character, but also the elements of Irish prosperity, as a confederacy of rich proprietors to dun the national Treasury, and so to eke out from our resources that employment for the poor which they are themselves bound to provide, by every sense of duty, to a land from which they derive their incomes. It is too hard that the Irish landlord should come to ask charity of the English and Scottish mechanic, in a year in which the export of produce to England has been beyond all precedent extensive and productive. But it seems that those who forget all duties forget all shame.”