

Nassau Senior, the *Edinburgh Review* and Ireland, 1843-49

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I

Despite the best efforts of Irish revisionists to exorcise any trace of emotiveness from historical writing, the recent academic literature on the Great Famine of 1845-50 has retained a dramatis personae of numerous villains alongside a few humanitarian heroes. The purpose of this essay is to consider the political role of one individual who is generally classified amongst the villains. Nassau Senior was, in the opinion of the economic historian Cormac Ó Gráda, a master of distortion, an inhumane cynic on the “hard left” of radical Whigdom’ who lacked even the honesty to admit his ‘back-room role’ in designing Whig relief ‘experiments’.¹ In her recent history of the Famine, Christine Kinealy also denounces Senior (alongside Harriet Martineau) as a champion of the ‘prevailing dogma’ that determined the grossly inadequate relief policy of 1846-50.² Without seeking to defend Senior’s record in these catastrophic years, it strikes me that both these judgements are demonstrably inaccurate, and based on misunderstandings of Senior’s ideas and political influence in the 1840s.

This confusion is understandable. Senior was indeed one of the leading ‘classical’ economic theorists of his day, with personal connections at the top table of Whig society. His writings on Ireland in the 1840s – expressing explicit policy prescriptions as well as economic analysis – appeared in the *Edinburgh Review*, often seen as the ‘house magazine’ of the Whig party, and were taken extremely seriously by interested observers. Moreover, his creative influence on social policy-making in the 1830s, particularly as regards the English poor-law reform act of 1834, has long been undisputed.³ Given the need most historians feel to explain in ideological terms the failure of British response to the Great Irish Famine – arguably the worst peacetime social cata-

1 Cormac Ó Gráda, *Ireland before and after the Famine* (Manchester, 1988), pp. 112-13.

2 Christine Kinealy, *This Great Calamity: The Irish Famine 1845-52* (Dublin, 1994), p. 355.

3 Although recent research has emphasized that Senior was by no means the sole author of the bill, and that influences other than classical economics and Benthamism were involved, see Peter Mandler, ‘Tories and Paupers: Christian Political Economy and the Making of the New Poor Law’ in *Historical Journal*, xxxiii (1990), pp. 81-103.

strophe in any European state in the last two centuries – the temptation to blame the ‘classical political economy’ represented by Senior is powerful. The flaw lies in the tendency to oversimplify the complex web of ideas and motivations underlying this policy, and in particular to ignore the frequently bitter and personalized disputes within governing circles over how to deal with the Irish crisis. In his ‘new economic history’ of Ireland, Ó Gráda writes that he knows of no way of measuring the role of Senior’s writings in constraining relief.⁴ This may be overly pessimistic: close political analysis of private correspondence as well as public commentary may serve as a suitable (if admittedly inexact and non-quantitative) method of analysis.

For a ‘Whig’, Senior was a late addition to the *Edinburgh Review* stable of essayists and critics; indeed his economic writings had been the subject of considerable criticism in that review in the 1830s.⁵ He was first approached by the editor Macvey Napier in May 1841,⁶ and became a regular contributor on a range of topics for the next eight years. The ‘innately conservative’ Napier, who edited the *Edinburgh* from 1829 until his death in 1847,⁷ was anxious to see off the challenge posed by the new monthly periodicals and to consolidate the journal as the agreed voice of a Whig party now endangered by Conservative revival. Napier was aware that Senior had by 1841 established a formidable name for himself in the public sphere, and appeared a useful recruit.

As the first Drummond Professor of Political Economy at Oxford in 1825–30 (a post he held again in 1847–52), Senior had developed a more ‘optimistic’ strand of classical economic theory that questioned the rigidity of Ricardo’s law of diminishing returns and the universal applicability of Malthus’s theory of population. Yet he declared himself wary of applying the theory of economic ‘science’ directly to policy. In his *Outline of Political Economy* (1836) he warned his readers explicitly that while the subject of political economy was the nature, production and distribution of wealth, legislation had a different purpose: the promotion of human welfare. Knowledge of economic principles was vital for the legislator, but was of itself insufficient as it comprised only a partial explanation for human behaviour and motivations. While there was an ‘art of government’, there could be no ‘art of economics’ – at least at its present state of development.⁸

Senior’s espousal of this apparently self-denying position (one which some contemporary economists, such as McCulloch would have rejected), may have

4 Cormac Ó Gráda, *Ireland: A New Economic History 1780-1939* (Oxford, 1994), p. 192.

5 [Herman Merivale], ‘Senior on Political Economy’, in *Edinburgh Review*, lxvi (October 1837), pp. 73–102.

6 Senior to Napier, 12 May 1841, Nassau Senior Papers, National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth, C283.

7 Joanne Shattock, *Politics and the Reviewers: The ‘Edinburgh’ and the ‘Quarterly’ in the Early Victorian Age* (Leicester, 1989), p. 25.

8 Marian Bowley, *Nassau Senior and Classical Economics* (London, 1937), pp. 254–5, 263–6.

come about in consequence of his initial forays into social questions, as a commissioner of inquiry into the English poor laws in 1832–34, and as a semi-official investigator into the law of combinations in 1830 and into Irish poverty in 1831. It is clear, however, that he meant such limitations to apply to the discipline rather than to himself; his own discussions of social questions, he wrote in 1847, had been undertaken as a moralist or statesman.⁹ There was an element of disingenuousness here: lacking a parliamentary seat,¹⁰ and having access to policy-making mainly through aristocratic patronage, he must have been aware that his influence was primarily due to his ability to articulate a political language that drew its power from a widespread public assumption of the omniscience of economic doctrine.

Although usually referred to as a Whig, in fact Senior's politics were more personal than partisan. He moved freely amongst a broad range of liberal politicians, Tory as well as Whig and Radical. Like his former teacher and close personal friend, Richard Whately, he favoured the idea of a centrist reforming liberal administration excluding the extremes of both traditions.¹¹ This did not conflict with his position from around 1830 as a member of Lord Lansdowne's Bowood circle of advisors and protégés. This was the social centre of what Peter Mandler has termed the 'moderate liberal' wing of the Whig-liberal party, which drew on Lansdowne's Shelburnite or non-Foxite tradition of whiggery, and which emphasized commercial and financial reforms along the lines of orthodox political economy. Lansdowne's other associates included Whately and Thomas Spring Rice (later Lord Monteaigle), and the group tended to work closely within the party with the former Canningites Palmerston and Melbourne.¹²

Although triumphant over English poor law reform in 1834, the political limitations of the Senior-Bowood nexus were evident by 1836. Ireland had interested Senior since his first visit there in 1819, when he had become convinced that Ireland's evils were founded on the economic consequences of absenteeism and the Protestant Ascendancy.¹³ By 1831 he was considered sufficiently expert on the subject to be asked to investigate semi-officially the question of the relief of Irish poverty. Senior's response was virtually identical to the official report on Irish social conditions prepared in 1836 by Richard

9 *Ibid.*, p. 264.

10 Senior was urged to stand for Oxford in 1837, but declined on the grounds of expense, his lack of oratorical skills, and the unlikelihood of success in a predominantly Tory seat, Howick to Senior, 15 June, Senior to Howick, 15 June 1837, Senior Papers, C122, C123.

11 Whately to Senior, 2 January 1845, in E. Jane Whately (ed.), *Life and Correspondence of Richard Whately* 2 vols (London, 1866), vol. ii, pp. 76–7.

12 Peter Mandler, *Aristocratic Government in the Age of Reform: Whigs and Liberals 1830–1852* (Oxford, 1990), pp. 102–4.

13 S. Leon Levy, *Nassau W. Senior 1790–1864* (Newton Abbot, 1970), pp. 218–19.

Whately, now Anglican Archbishop of Dublin, which was generally endorsed by his former student. Granting a right to poor relief to the able-bodied poor in Ireland was ruled inadmissible, but the advocates of classical economics recognized that Ireland was to some extent an exceptional case, destined to follow a different path to development to the English norm, and thus requiring different measures. Pure *laissez-faire* was inappropriate, but the problem was to find ways of stimulating the economy that would not contribute to the causes of stagnation by inhibiting exertion. Education was one field evidently suited to intervention, as Senior identified the existing state of Irish society as being suffused with ignorance, expressed in the people's systematic opposition to the law and apparent incompetence in their daily occupations. Whately and Senior demanded the expansion of the (theoretically non-denominational) national school system established in Ireland in 1831.¹⁴ More innovatory was their call for transitional aid in the form of state-sponsored remunerative public works, such as the construction of roads, canals, railways and harbours, and granting assistance to landlords for drainage and waste-land reclamation.¹⁵ The 1836 Whately report argued that if combined with state-sponsored assisted emigration, such measures could bring about a reversal in Ireland's fortunes. Conversely, any extension to Ireland of a poor law granting a right to relief to the able-bodied, would be disastrous to the country. Senior argued that given Ireland's poverty, the principle of less-eligibility entrenched in the workhouse test would not be workable, and the consequences would be worse than in pre-1834 England.¹⁶

For various reasons, the Senior-Whately plan of 1836 was rejected by the Whig cabinet, and an amended form of the English poor law, granting able-bodied relief within the workhouse at the discretion of the guardians, was extended to Ireland in 1838, despite their angry protestations.¹⁷ Two things are evident from this debacle: firstly that the brand of economic orthodoxy represented by Senior was far from being an obsessive advocate of *laissez-faire* for Ireland, and secondly that there were other tendencies in Whig-liberalism pre-

14 For the economic agenda underlying Whately's education programme in Ireland, see Thomas A. Boylan and Timothy P. Foley, *Political Economy and Colonial Ireland* (London, 1992), pp. 67-99.

15 Nassau W. Senior, *A Letter to Lord Howick on a Legal Provision for the Irish Poor* (London, 1831), p. 45.

16 *Third Report of the Commission for Inquiring into the Condition of the Poorer Classes in Ireland*, Parliamentary Papers 1836 (35) xxx, p. 1; *Letter from Nassau W. Senior, esq., to H.M. Principal Secretary of State for the Home Dept., on the Third Report from the Commissioners for Inquiry into the Condition of the Poor in Ireland, Dated 14th April 1836*, Parl. Papers 1837 (90) li, 241. Senior's paper made certain criticisms of the details of the Whately report, but endorsed its principal recommendations.

17 Whately was still furious in 1843 at the 'trickery' by which the bill was passed, Whately to Senior, 29 September 1843, Senior Papers, C628.

pared to spurn orthodox opinion and antagonize its leading proponents. This divergence would become clearer in the 1840s.

II

Senior's first *Edinburgh* contribution on Ireland was a focused and cautious piece on mendicancy published in April 1843.¹⁸ In this he acknowledged the 1838 Poor Law as an established fact (albeit still in the experimental stage), but argued that the omission of clauses outlawing mendicancy had removed any hope that it might initiate the reform of Irish character. The article had little immediate impact, but was to provide the justification for an Irish Vagrancy Act passed in 1847 – itself a pet project of Lord Lansdowne.¹⁹

Senior returned to the Irish question more generally later that year. The choice of topic was obvious: from May 1843 the island had been convulsed by a series of mass 'monster meetings' organized by Daniel O'Connell's movement for Repeal of the Union. Such was the momentum generated by the campaign, and its ability to absorb pent-up agrarian grievances, that many contemporaries feared that social revolution or civil war would break out. Always favourable towards Irish reformism, the Whig leader Lord John Russell joined Irish liberals in attacking the inaction of the Conservative government and demanding positive Irish measures. His aim was unambiguous – to wean O'Connell back to the reformist 'Justice to Ireland' political strategy of the later 1830s, while simultaneously reviving Whig morale on a traditional Foxite issue.

Yet Russell's party was united only by opposition to Peel's government. Consensus on economic measures was unlikely, so it was probable that agreement on 'healing measures' for Ireland would be confined initially to questions of the established church and Catholic rights. The party leaders were able to achieve a degree of cohesion through their mutual endorsement of Nassau Senior's article in the January 1844 number of the *Edinburgh Review*.²⁰

The initiative for the article came from Senior and Lansdowne, who agreed that a statement of Whig-liberal measures was expedient at a time when Irish agitation was 'making the whole empire shake'. From the beginning the article had a political purpose, as Senior was persuaded that Peel's ministry could be destabilized by the Irish question.²¹ Senior had already a clear idea of what was

18 [Nassau Senior], 'Mendicancy in Ireland', in *Edinburgh Review*, lxxvii (April 1843), pp. 391-411.

19 Lansdowne to Russell, n.d. (February 1847), Russell Papers, Public Record Office, Kew, PRO 30/22/6B, fols 13-14.

20 [Nassau Senior], 'Ireland', in *Edinburgh Review*, lxxix (January 1844), pp. 189-266.

21 Senior to Napier, 5 June 1843, Macvey Napier Papers, British Library, London, Add. MSS 34,623, fols. 589-91.

required in Ireland; his starting points were the remodelling of the established church, a provision for the Catholic clergy from an imperial fund, the improvement of national education, and the abolition of the lord lieutenantancy.²² The article was from the outset a Bowood project. Monteagle, Whately and Lord Hatherton (Irish chief secretary 1833-34) read the early drafts, and Lansdowne gave it his imprimatur.²³ Monteagle, who was then the *Edinburgh's* chief commentator on economic policy, had some reservations about the final draft, fearing that Senior's lack of local knowledge had led him to be somewhat rash in his language and to exaggerate his criticism of the Catholic church, and regretting that he omitted to deal with the poor law and land tenure issues. However, some of Monteagle's suggestions were adopted, and he was always in agreement with the main points and principles.²⁴ Since 1836 the moderate agenda had shifted away from developmental intervention towards the promotion of agencies of social control and economic stimulation – reflecting both the limited revival of Irish commercial agriculture from the mid-1830s, and the railway speculation boom in Ireland that had shadowed that of Great Britain. For moderate liberals the central problem in Ireland was not the structural inequalities of the land system, but the privileges of the established church and the absence of state control over the Catholic clergy.

Macvey Napier was anxious to assert his journal's position as the official mouthpiece of the party, and rebuked Senior's suggestion that a 'mixed government' might implement his recommendations. In late November and early December, copies of the manuscript were circulated to other party leaders for their comments. Russell took a keen interest in the paper, believing it 'able, calm and judicious'; but his detailed objections reveal the disparity of perspective lying behind the superficial consensus. Senior argued that Catholic endowment was necessary to separate the clergy from the unruly masses and the 'revolutionary' party. This was argued from first principles with rigorous logic:

1. I trace the physical evils of Ireland to the concurrent want of capital and of small proprietors. I trace the want of capital to insecurity, ignorance and indolence; and both of these to insecurity. 2. I trace insecurity to the hatred of the law. I say that the law cannot be popular till the institutions of Ireland are just, and justice requires the two churches be put on equality. Therefore the Catholic priests must be paid.²⁵

22 The first two of these had been raised regularly in Senior's previous writings, see *Letter to Lord Howick*, pp. 66-78, 'Letter ... on the Third Report from the Commissioners', p. 12, Nassau Senior, *On National Property* (1835).

23 Senior to Napier, 2 June, Hatherton to Senior, 4 July, Whately to Senior, 29 September 1843, Lansdowne to Senior, October 1843; Senior Papers, C305, C139, C628, C204.

24 Monteagle to Napier, 7 December 1843, Monteagle Papers, National Library of Ireland, Dublin, MS 13,394/4.

25 Senior to Napier, 14 November 1843, Napier Papers, Add MSS 34,624, fols 216-17.

Russell's defence of the Whig government's record in 1835-41 – when he had postponed endowment on finding the Catholic prelates averse to it – and the tone of his comments on future policy, expressed a different priority: 'Unless the feelings of the Irish people, their national pride and ambition are satisfied, it is useless to propose stipends for their clergy or outlay of money. They will consider such offers as bribes to church them'.²⁶ Senior amended his draft to take account of some of these cavils, but Russell did not press them. He told Napier: 'I must repeat that although a general concurrence of views between the *Edinburgh Review*, and the bulk of the Whig party is very desirable, it would injure both the party and the *Review*, if the writers in the *Review* were checked in their general observations, or the party bound to enforce practically all that is speculatively beneficial'.²⁷

For Russell and his circle, the *Edinburgh Review* article was of value as a reformist manifesto that was broadly acceptable to most elements of the party, but their commitment did not extend to the ideological premises from which Senior and Lansdowne drew their version of 'justice to Ireland'. For Senior the moral evils of Ireland – the absence of the structural and internalized instruments of 'civilization' central to classical theory – were at the root of the physical ones. Consequently, Catholic endowment was the primary instrumental measure required to further the desired end of economic development along orthodox lines. Senior believed it worthwhile to conciliate only the clergy and the gentry, for O'Connell and his 'revolutionary party' were beyond the pale. Indeed in his earlier drafts Senior had included a character sketch denigrating the Irish leader as intellectually shallow, morally dishonest and (worst of all) inadmissible to good society.²⁸

The 1843 events led Senior to go beyond his original intention and address (in passing) the land question in his paper. 'Fixity of tenure' he denounced as the desire of the social revolutionaries in the repeal movement to confiscate the property of Ireland. In his description of the material evils of Ireland he was, however, prepared to modify the orthodox theory so far as to admit that 'want of small proprietors' might be a problem of equal weight to 'want of capital'. A society could succeed if supplied with one and not the other, but his strong preference remained for an adequate supply of capital and a tripartite division of labour. Peasant societies lacked middle classes and hence were deficient in civilization, and were less likely to facilitate high labour productivity and a rapid accumulation of wealth. The achievement of social harmony under such a system required considerable capital investment, but this would be forthcoming from England once the principal moral evil of insecurity was

²⁶ Russell to Napier, 14 November 1843, *ibid.*, fols 255-6.

²⁷ Russell to Napier, 9 December 1843, *ibid.*, fols 719-20.

²⁸ Nassau W. Senior, *Journals, Conversations and Essays Relating to Ireland*, 2 vols (London, 1868), vol. i, p. 139.

removed. Senior did not rule out the desirability of 'small proprietors', but these were subsidiary to his main arguments, and bourgeois rather than peasant ownership was implied.²⁹ He believed that the solution to Irish social conflict lay in the harmonization of interests inherent in a fully capitalized large-farm society – turning the land from a source of subsistence into a 'machine for the investment of capital'.³⁰ The existing land law was largely satisfactory, and the problem lay in the ignorance and resistance to the law that characterized Irish rural society. While 'justice to Ireland' represented for Foxites such as Russell a positive response to the articulated grievances of Ireland, Bowood was more interested in finding mechanisms to persuade the Irish to accept the justice of anglicized social and economic relationships. Peel's cautious steps towards implementing the sort of agenda Senior had in mind, most noticeably in the augmented grant to Maynooth in 1845, further persuaded the moderates of the desirability of some form of 'mixed government'. Despite Senior's advocacy, Catholic endowment was to have a low place in Russell's agenda in government until he turned to it in desperation for a 'comprehensive measure' in 1848. By then, as Whately feared, it was too late.³¹

III

The Whigs returned to power in July 1846, just as a second, and nearly total, failure of the potato crop threw Ireland into a deepening famine crisis. Whereas opposition had allowed party leaders to fudge their differences, the imperative question of famine relief forced open the fault lines of the new government. There was a general consensus that relief policy should also promote a rural transition that involved the commercialization of agriculture, righting the perceived capital-labour imbalance, and accelerating a tripartite division of labour in the countryside, but sharp divisions emerged on the relative weight of relief and reconstruction, and on the strategies necessary for both.

In the confusion following the unexpected second potato failure, Charles Trevelyan, the Assistant Secretary to the Treasury, emerged as the key policy-

29 [Senior], 'Ireland', pp. 190-7, 241-2. The reference to small proprietors appears to have been inserted in response to the Foxite former Lord Lieutenant Lord Fortescue's pressing of the subject, Fortescue to Senior, 17 November, Senior to Fortescue, 24 November 1843, Fortescue Papers, Devon County Record Office, Exeter, 1262M/FC99.

30 Senior, 'Letter ... on the Third Report from the Commissioners', p. 5.

31 Whately to Senior, 4 September 1847, Senior Papers, C669. For the endowment proposals of 1848-9, see Donal A. Kerr, *'A Nation of Beggars'? Priests, People and Politics in Famine Ireland 1846-1852* (Oxford, 1994), pp. 166-95.

maker. Overhauling the public works relief set up by Peel in the previous season, and introducing the 'labour rate' principle to make Irish property more responsible for the relief of Irish poverty. In seeking to transform the public works into a penal mechanism to oblige Irish peasants to exert themselves and Irish landlords to undertake their 'moral duties', Trevelyan had the energetic support of Charles Wood, the new Chancellor of the Exchequer and Earl Grey, the colonial secretary. All shared a 'moralist' agenda which held the moral failings of the people rather than environmental factors responsible for Irish distress, and which used providentialist ideas to lend divine sanction to their policy prescriptions. They differed most sharply from Senior in adhering to a labour theory of value and in denying that the wages-fund in Ireland was rigidly fixed. Ireland, in their view, required not so much imported capital, as the will to create wealth from abundant latent resources. The moralists were conscious that the bulk of British middle-class opinion, spurred on by the liberal press, supported a more retributive policy against Irish landlordism and in particular the extension to Ireland of the outdoor relief clauses and local responsibility in the English poor law.³²

Moderate liberals held views antithetical to such moralist dogmatics, and in general regarded the Irish situation in a coolly secular light. After suffering a rebuff in the cabinet on the terms of the August 1846 poor employment ('labour rate') bill, the moderates put their energies into resisting any further moves towards an extension of the poor law. Nassau Senior articulated their fears in an *Edinburgh Review* article of October 1846, which was again produced in collaboration with Lansdowne and Monteagle.³³ All were in a state of 'utmost anxiety' about the intentions of the cabinet regarding the poor law. The article was directed ostensibly against the radical economist George Poulett Scrope's 'anarchical' proposals for extending the Irish poor law,³⁴ but it was also implicitly critical of moralist assumptions. Senior was anxious to defend the record of Irish landlords against the assaults of British radicals and the press. He assailed moralist and radical assumptions of an unlimited Irish wages-fund, and insisted that landlords should not be compelled to bear the burdens of relief unaided. Although he rejected Malthusian pessimism for such a 'civilized society' as England, where labourers were intelligent enough to

32 See Peter Gray, 'Ideology and the Famine', in Cathal Póirtéir (ed.), *The Great Irish Famine* (Cork, 1995), pp. 86-103.

33 [Nassau Senior], 'Proposals for Extending the Irish Poor Law', in *Edinburgh Review*, lxxxiv (October 1846), pp. 267-314; Lansdowne to Napier, 3 July, Senior to Napier, 5 August 1846, Napier Papers, Add MSS 34,626, fols 268-9, 330-3.

34 George Poulett Scrope, *Letters to the Right Hon. Lord John Russell, on the Expediency of Enlarging the Irish Poor Law* (London, 1846). The anti-Malthusian Scrope claimed that not only could Irish landowners afford a comprehensive relief system, but that 'it is notorious that Ireland possesses the means within herself of maintaining and employing twice or four times the number of her existing population'.

choose a higher standard of living over the proclivity to reproduce, the same could not necessarily be said of a 'backward' country like Ireland. Faced with the imminence of social collapse, Senior now abandoned his previous interventionist leanings and embraced a ruthless *laissez-faire* line:

The labouring poor of every country is condemned by nature to a life, which is one struggle against want ... Hunger and cold are the punishments by which she represses improvidence and sloth. If we remove these punishments, we must substitute other means of repression. The pauper by some other means must sacrifice his immunity from the ordinary obligations of life ... his situation must be rendered less eligible than that of the independent labourer.³⁵

As less eligibility was impossible in Ireland, the poor had to be left to their own devices. At the same time, the extraction of rent and the increase of landlord powers *vis-à-vis* their tenants were vital there if what now appeared an excessive population was not to rise further out of control. Previous British misgovernment and the inappropriate extension of English constitutional liberties to Ireland had brought about the present crisis; evictions and greater coercive powers were vital if equilibrium was to be restored.

Senior's strictures were also directed at the Prime Minister, who was suspected of being both a weak link in the chain against extending the poor law and of harbouring heterodox opinions on Irish land reform and poor relief.³⁶ Russell's antagonism towards Irish landlordism was well known, and his continuing yearning for unspecified 'comprehensive measures' of Irish reform a constant worry to orthodox opinion. The prime minister's suggestion in late 1847 that a form of Ulster tenant-right be legalized throughout Ireland provoked paroxysms of anger.

In the short term Senior's initiative was successful, insofar as Russell declared his unwillingness to extend the poor law in September 1846. Yet the impact was only partial and temporary, and the Prime Minister also stated his dislike of the illiberal tone of the article – the first five pages of which seemed, in his mind, to 'contradict all of what Whigs have maintained from 1796 to 1846'.³⁷ More importantly, Senior's suggestions as to alternative relief measures – he now rejected public relief works as counter-productive – amounted to little more than limited government grants in aid of local charitable subscriptions, and were clearly inadequate to the imperative of saving

35 [Senior], 'Proposals', p. 303.

36 Senior to Napier, 14, 21, 22 August 1846, Napier Papers, Add MSS 34,626, fols 347-8, 364-5, 368-9.

37 Russell to Napier, 8 September 1846, Napier Papers, Add MSS 34,626, fols 404-5.

life in Ireland which had been declared by Russell and his Lord Lieutenant Bessborough.³⁸

Senior was thus a late convert to a policy of *laissez-faire* in Ireland, and embraced it only in response to what he regarded as the demoralizing and socially destructive forms of intervention adopted by Russell's ministry. In the following six months, the unremitting pressure of Irish distress would lead to a series of measures being passed against the expressed opposition of the Bowood group: first the temporary relief (or soup kitchens) act of February 1847, followed by the poor law extension act of June 1847, which embodied many of the clauses against which Senior had written. Only the admission of the fateful quarter-acre clause amendment in the poor law act prevented resignations from the cabinet.

The history of relief policy-making during the Great Famine demonstrates not the dominance of Senior and orthodox political economy, but their marginalization. During the poor law debates, Whately, Monteagle and Senior issued jeremiads against the bill from the sidelines, and Lansdowne kept an uneasy silence in the cabinet. Senior was by now convinced that the potato failure had left Ireland over-populated by a redundant mass of two million people, who could not be 'safely' relieved from famine; he confided to Whately that he would 'rather encounter all the miseries that will follow the rejection of this bill to those I anticipate from its passing'.³⁹ On this question, however, the running was made by Wood and Trevelyan, strongly backed by middle-class radicalism. Only when both these elements combined to stymie Irish proposals for state intervention in the international food trade, or Russell's proposals for land reform, did orthodoxy make itself felt. Its achievement was essentially negative – blocking remedial experimentation in alliance with other elements within the wider liberal bloc.

Even the *Edinburgh Review* seemed to acknowledge the ascendancy of moralist dogma by publishing in its January 1848 number Charles Trevelyan's apologia for the Treasury's policy, later published separately as *The Irish Crisis*. This diatribe declared the potato disease to be part of God's plan for Irish reconstruction, defended the rigid imposition of the extended poor law and advocated self-exertion by all classes as the means to unleash the potentially unlimited resources of Ireland.⁴⁰ The *Edinburgh's* new editor, William Empson, was unhappy with Trevelyan's blithe dismissal of Malthusian doctrine, but failed to persuade the author to adopt a more 'orthodox' tone.⁴¹

38 *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates*, 3rd ser., lxxxviii, pp. 777–8 (17 August 1846: Russell).

39 Senior to (Whately), 20 April 1847, Monteagle Papers, MS 13,397/10.

40 [Charles Trevelyan], 'The Irish Crisis', in *Edinburgh Review*, lxxxvii (January 1848), pp. 229–320.

41 Empson to Trevelyan, October 1847, Treasury Papers, Public Record Office, Kew, T64/367A/2. Empson had been a colleague of Malthus at Haileybury in the 1820s.

IV

Trevelyan's arrogant treatment of the *Edinburgh* editorial staff,⁴² and the growing awareness that famine conditions had not ended with the harvest of 1847, led the review to return to the safer hands of Senior in late 1848. Senior had travelled in the north west of Ireland in September of that year in the company of his brother Edward, a poor law inspector, and was eager to bring to a wider audience the observations he had already expressed privately to Lansdowne.⁴³ Everything he had seen there (admittedly mostly in Donegal, by no means the most distressed county in Ireland in 1848) had convinced him that his warnings about the counter-productive effects of the poor law had been more than justified.⁴⁴ In extending an English institution to a more backward society, the government had created 'a gigantic engine of confiscation and demoralization'. Such was the polemical slant of the third article, published in January 1849, that he denied that famine, in the sense of a physical catastrophe, was still continuing – all distress was now solely attributable to the malign working of the poor law. Senior was more blunt than most moderates in asserting the absolute character of Irish over-population and insisting on the necessity of diminishing the number of people by any means. Like the Conservative leader Lord Stanley, but unlike Monteaigle, he ruled out any extensive state emigration scheme as too expensive to be practicable. The implication was clear: in the absence of voluntary emigration, mass starvation was inevitable. Any hope for the future lay in amending the poor law and strengthening the rights of property. In an almost parodic return to his more 'optimistic' views of five years previously, he added that Catholic endowment (now in practice a dead duck) might help sugar the pill.⁴⁵

Senior's last piece on Ireland for the *Edinburgh* was in no way a party manifesto, although it was privately read and approved by Lansdowne.⁴⁶ It was in effect a cry of despair from a faction that had failed to determine government response during the Famine. It is perhaps not surprising that, while many other

42 Empson vetoed any further articles by Trevelyan when the latter refused to permit any editorial control over his opinions; Empson to Trevelyan, 7 January 1848, Trevelyan to Empson, 8 January 1848, *ibid.*, T64/368B.

43 Senior to Lansdowne, 7, 26 September 1848, Senior Papers, C215, C217. Senior expressed his belief that racial differences between those of Celtic and Saxon descent in Ulster was evident in moral attitudes, and endorsed Protestant objections to the proposed rate in aid for the west.

44 *Ibid.* Even such acts of charity as Count Strzelecki's feeding of pauper children in the schools on behalf of the British Association Senior denounced as an impediment to education.

45 [Nassau Senior], 'Relief of Irish Distress', in *Edinburgh Review*, lxxxix (January 1849), pp. 221-68.

46 Senior to Lansdowne, 2 December 1848, Senior Papers, C218.

British observers subsequently tended to gloss the Irish famine as a painful but necessary step in the road to civilization, Senior was more sceptical. Looking back from 1861 he admitted that he had been excessively fearful about the poor law and had underestimated the extent of voluntary emigration, but doubted 'whether any great alteration in the habits or feelings of the people has taken place'. Failure to adopt the measures he had consistently proposed was at the root of Ireland's continuing malaise.⁴⁷ Depopulation alone, he believed, could not solve the 'Irish problem'. With breathtaking cynicism he commented privately to Benjamin Jowett, that only a million deaths had 'scarcely been enough to do much good'.⁴⁸

Several conclusions might be drawn. In the complex relationship between economic thinking and public policy, it is inadequate and distracting to turn primarily to the most theoretically sophisticated and articulate statements of economic theory to account for governing practice. Rather, it is vital to turn to a broader range of sources – the press and popular pamphlets, sermons and private correspondence – to build up a picture that, while lacking the intellectual coherence of orthodox thought, more accurately reflects the gamut of conflicting forces operating on political protagonists. Due consideration must be given to other ideological tendencies – all bearing the some relationship to classical economic thought, but differing from it in objectives, strategies and interpretations of both human nature and the laws of the natural world. Christian political economy, providentialism, moralism and Foxite whiggery all played important roles in the public policy debate. All must be grasped and placed in the context of the highly personalized but in the later 1840s relatively open British political world. Nassau Senior and the *Edinburgh Review* spoke not for the Whig party but for a certain faction within it, which co-existed uneasily with the remainder. In the Famine years they found their opinions swept aside by a populist middle-class tide which identified the moral failings of Irish landowners as the root of Irish evils, and which demanded policy prescriptions directed at that target. What this ideology shared with classical economics was the low priority it placed on the preservation of human life – and a wilful blindness towards the agonies of the Irish population in the midst of famine.

47 Senior, *Journals*, vol. i, pp. vii–xiii.

48 Cited in Ó Gráda, *Ireland before and after the Famine*, p. 112.