

# Introduction: Victoria's Ireland? Irishness and Britishness, 1837–1901

PETER GRAY

The reign of Queen Victoria (1837–1901) accounted for more than half of the lifespan of the Union of Great Britain and Ireland. Coming in the wake of upheavals associated with the aftermath of rebellion, the polarisation of the Catholic emancipation and 'second reformation' campaigns, and the initiation of the Repeal movement, Victoria's accession coincided with a period of political quiet and initially appeared to presage a new beginning in the British–Irish relationship. Her reign witnessed a series of attempts to 'complete' the project of the 1801 Union, widely regarded by its defenders and critics alike as unfinished; these in turn provoked counter-reactions among both defenders of Irish difference, and others rejecting the desirability or possibility of British (or English) integration or accommodation with an 'inferior' people. In a variety of realms – state policy, political and economic discourses, literary and cultural production – British state- and nation-building agendas were promoted, challenged or synthesised over the course of the Victorian era.

This collection of interdisciplinary essays focuses on the articulation and interplay of 'Irish' and 'British' identities during the Victorian period in Ireland, Great Britain and beyond. To some commentators inherently antagonistic, to others potentially complementary, 'Irishness' and 'Britishness' were described and contested with increasing intensity throughout the long period of Victoria's reign. These essays use a range of approaches to throw light on the complexities of that relationship, including the Victorian monarchy's attitude towards Ireland and Irish reactions to it, debates about Irish difference and integration, and varied constructions of Ireland's place in the imperial world order. Particular attention is given to the Great Famine as a rupturing force in Victorian Irish–British relations and to attempts made to contain or even to reconcile the resulting cleavage through literature, economic theory and public policy. A further theme running through some of these essays is the significance of the 1860s–70s as second, pivotal, period of transformation in the British–Irish relationship.

James H. Murphy's essay sets the tone for the volume through an assessment of Victoria's engagement with Ireland and the changing attitudes towards monarchy in Ireland during the course of her reign. His thesis is that the failure of the monarchical 'golden link' between Ireland and Britain was contingent and was evident only from the 1870s. Prior to that decade conditional monarchism was part of a mainstream nationalist repertoire inherited from Daniel

O'Connell. Paradoxically it was the conscious attempts by the British political establishment to deploy the 'reconciling magic of monarchy' in opposition to Irish nationalism that made simultaneous allegiance increasingly untenable and paved the way for the success of the 1890s caricature of Victoria as the 'Famine Queen'. Despite the residual appeal of the glamour of monarchy and the persistent fantasy of Victoria's private sympathy for Ireland (still evident during her final visit in 1900), public monarchism had been largely 'squeezed out' in Catholic and nationalist Ireland by the time of her death.

Victoria's personal ambivalence towards the Irish – alternating between a matronly enthusiasm for their participation in royal visits and British wars and an increasingly personalised antagonism towards any manifestation of Irish nationalism – was shared by many of her British subjects. In his essay, Gary Peatling subjects the historian and political commentator Goldwin Smith to close scrutiny. Rejecting any reductionist 'imperialist' reading of Smith's writings on Ireland, Peatling traces the contradictions therein, and suggests that the essentialist racism that Smith manifested towards the Irish conflicted with his advocacy of local self-government within the empire and the necessity of 'training the Celt' to political responsibility.

If Goldwin Smith never resolved the dilemma of how the Irish could be simultaneously part of and alien to British society, more practical questions of accommodation and resistance to the British body politic faced Irish nationalist MPs serving at Westminster. James McConnel argues that the domestic realities of politics have been unduly neglected, and sets out to rectify this oversight for the rank and file of the Irish Parliamentary Party between 1885 and 1914. He concludes that the early hostility demonstrated towards nationalist MPs, and the strains imposed on this largely middle-class cohort by London life, encouraged strong internal bonding, but that this tended to diminish over time with growing 'fraternalisation' and integration into the domestic (and indeed, sporting) life of Parliament.

The second section, 'Literature, Leisure and Identity', begins with Cora Kaplan's study of racial discourses of 'Irishness' as manifested in the writings of Charles Kingsley and Thomas Carlyle. After a discussion of the racial theories of Robert Knox, whose essentialist reductionism and emphasis on Anglo-Saxon racial superiority to all other white 'races' marked the outer limit of Victorian racial logic, Kaplan describes Kingsley and Carlyle as representatives of a more ethically troubled and confused centre, whose representations of the Irish and of Irishness veered uneasily between racial differentiation and the pull of a pan-European discourse of whiteness. Without shying from the numerous deployments of racialised language – from Kingsley's depiction of 'human chimpanzees' on his 1860 fishing trip to Sligo, to Carlyle's observation of Irish immigrants 'sunk from decent manhood to squalid apehood' – this nuanced analysis concludes that both used these discourses inconsistently and instrumentally, in contrast to their more essentialist representations of non-white subjects.

Patrick Maume draws our attention to the very different representation of Irishness offered in the popular entertainments of Robert Martin, Unionist political activist, brother of Violet Martin (of the 'Somerville and Ross' partnership) and creator of the comic persona 'Ballyhooly'. Martin's life and art were self-consciously modelled on the Leveresque tradition of Tory hedonism, featuring fantasies of escape from social constraints and the restoration of a depoliticised feudal relationship between landlord and tenant (as well as between the imperial matriarch, Victoria, and her Irish subjects). Martin's legacy lay more in the virulent reaction he provoked from nationalist critics than in the Unionist music-hall tradition he played a leading role in promoting.

The theme of Victoria's place in Irish society is taken up by Tom Hayes in his essay on sport and dining in Limerick. Like James Murphy, he identifies the 1870s as a transitional decade, in which the previously uncontroversial toasting of the Queen on sporting occasions gave way to a more politically polarised and non-deferential sporting environment in which renditions of 'God Save Ireland' acquired greater prominence. The nationalisation of Irish sport predated the emergence of the GAA, and was manifest in such unlikely venues as the Shannon rowing regattas, archery meets and cricket matches.

The three papers in the section on 'Ireland and the Victorian World Order' consider contrasting ways in which Irish agents and commentators responded to the challenges and opportunities presented by the British Empire. Jennifer Ridden discusses the attempts undertaken by members of the Irish liberal Protestant elite to define and mould a liberal and pluralistic empire as an entity in which Irishness could coexist rather than conflict with an imperial Britishness, and in which the Irish could take full advantage of the opportunities offered by Britain's global expansion. Two case studies drawn from the Limerick-Clare liberal Protestant circle illuminate the argument: as governor of New South Wales in the years immediately preceding Victoria's accession, Sir Richard Bourke faced down considerable local opposition in his drive to render the colony a neutral environment acceptable to Irish Catholic settlers. Perhaps more surprisingly, William Smith O'Brien also harboured hopes for an empire open to Irish migration and thus playing a positive role in the amelioration of Irish poverty – hopes not entirely dispelled by his turn to radical nationalism and experience of transportation to Van Diemen's Land. The legacy of these Irish liberal imperialists – in helping shape the reception of Irish migrants in the Australian colonies, and opening the possibility of moderate nationalist engagement with a 'pluralist' self-governing colonial system – was significant.

Looking beyond to another empire, Pandeileimon Hionidis investigates both Irish responses to the Cretan revolt of 1866–9, and contemporary parallels drawn between Cretan rebels and Irish Fenians. In general, Irish reactions mirrored attitudes towards the Irish 'national question', with the Protestant press denouncing the insurgents, the moderate nationalist press sympathising with the ends but not the means of revolt, and the 'advanced nationalists'

coming closest to endorsement of the revolt as a just struggle against imperial oppression.

Later in the century this 'advanced' association with other 'struggling nationalities' and anti-colonial struggles found its most articulate and committed spokesman in Michael Davitt. Carla King finds a consistency in Davitt's stance throughout his career, founded in a critique of British imperialism as essentially exploitative and self-interested. Davitt's interests and activities were wide-ranging, but it was the Boer War that triggered his most intense anti-imperialism. His enthusiastic support for the Boers gave rise to certain contradictions (his deployment of antisemitic language against the Uitlanders flew in the face of his public support for Jewish refugees from Tsarist pogroms, for example), but contributed to the growing polarisation in turn of the century Ireland over the country's participation in the imperial project.

The catastrophe of the Great Famine, perhaps more than any other development, problematises the concept of 'Victorian Ireland'. Cora Kaplan describes how a combination of guilt and denial prompted both Kingsley and Carlyle into 'genocidal fantasies' during and in the wake of the Famine. The final four essays in this volume further examine several dimensions of the disaster, its representation, and its legacy for post-Famine Ireland. Melissa Fegan and Yvonne Siddle discuss how two novelists – the Irishman William Carleton and the Irish-resident Englishman Anthony Trollope, respectively – experienced the catastrophe and sought to render it meaningful to themselves and their audiences. Fegan introduces Carleton as the pre-eminent shaper of literary images of Ireland in the early-Victorian period. His famine novel *The Black Prophet* (1846–7) helped mould the concept of the Great Famine as it unfolded, but interpreted it through tropes and assumptions drawn from the past that failed to encompass the sheer scale of the disaster. Overwhelmed by what he witnessed, Carleton's later fiction tended to regress from the social engagement and humanitarianism of his best writing. In contrast, Anthony Trollope's literary career blossomed in the aftermath of the Famine. Yvonne Siddle stresses the significance of his Irish sojourn in Trollope's personal development, and interprets his providentialist denial of British responsibility for mass mortality in this light. Trollope's *Castle Richmond* (1859–60) was written with the benefit of hindsight, but was marred as a novel by his continuing preoccupation with justifying the policy adopted in 1846–50 and the economic ideologies which underpinned it.

Those ideologies, and the retrospective defence of Famine policy in Irish liberal economic discourse, are the subjects of my own essay. I argue that the public activities of the 'Dublin School' of political economists in the later 1840s and 1850s amounted to a concerted effort to rationalise and justify the Famine as an emancipatory moment of socio-economic modernisation. Eighteen forty-nine – the year of Trollope's epistolary defence of Trevelyanism, of the Encumbered Estates Act, and of Queen Victoria's first visit to Ireland – was thus regarded as a year zero of Irish regeneration. This self-deluding optimism was

not, however, to survive the economic downturn of 1859–63 and the ideological shifts of the 1860s, and the political-economic ‘memory’ of the Famine tended thereafter to diverge between pessimistic Malthusianism and a historicist economics supportive of state intervention acknowledging Ireland’s separate path of social development.

Finally, Virginia Crossman’s essay explores how policy-makers’ fears of a replication of the Great Famine gave rise to a tension between orthodoxy and pragmatism in 1879–84. Faced with a crisis in the west provoked by economic depression and the potato failure of 1879, poor law officials proved reluctant to abandon an institutional ‘memory’ of the 1840s that stressed the necessity of caution and relief tests, but found themselves outflanked after 1880 by a Gladstone administration that eased the terms and conditions of relief – much to the frustration of the still-living Charles Trevelyan. The growing politicisation of poor relief after 1880 gave rise to further tensions and marked a growing deviation in social policy between Ireland and Great Britain.

Taken together, these essays indicate a series of unresolved tensions and conflicts between the concepts of ‘Irishness’ and ‘Britishness’ during Victoria’s reign. Hopes that equalised access to imperial opportunities (with or without Home Rule) would reconcile the Irish to a neutral imperial Britishness proved elusive (despite a degree of success in integrating the Australian and Canadian Irish). Despite a degree of domestication of IPP members at Westminster after 1885, constitutional nationalists (in sport, as in politics) became ever more vociferous in their rejection of the ‘British’ symbolism associated with crown and empire. The enthusiastic and rambunctious celebration of both in the Unionist entertainments of Robert Martin, and the attempted political utilisation of royal visits by the British political establishment, merely tended to increase this polarisation.

For a number of Victorian public intellectuals, such as Smith, Kingsley and Carlyle, reconciling the political logic of the Act of Union with the racialised constructions of Britishness (and/or Englishness) increasingly in vogue in the nineteenth century proved problematic. Environmentalism offered an alternative, developmental, interpretation of Irish ‘difference’, but frustration with the reluctance or inability of the Irish to ‘become British’ in the early, reformist, years of Victoria’s reign prompted many liberal integrationists to welcome the Famine as a *deus ex machina*, a beneficent providential intervention to break the log-jam impeding Ireland’s progress towards an anglicised modernity. The reluctance of both Trevelyan and Trollope to abandon this illusion may reflect a reluctance to give up a belief in the project of ‘making Ireland British’. If nationalists were always antagonistic, it was no doubt reassuring to the British integrationists to have the public support of a small but influential cadre of Irish liberal political economists. However, the latter’s loss of confidence in the narrative of progress and *volte face* towards historicism in the 1860s undermined the integrationist position and left a choice between a bleak Malthusian (and racialised) pessimism, and a historicist reformism that, whether in its

Gladstonian Liberal or 'Constructive Unionist' manifestations, pointed again towards Irish difference and un-Britishness. Despite the personal popularity or curiosity exhibited on Victoria's infrequent visits, 'Victoria's Ireland' proves something of a misnomer. Any hopes that the reign of the 'girl Queen' would heal the wounds of the past and see the Union completed in letter and spirit were dashed well before 1901.