

Romantic Ireland

Romantic Ireland:
From Tone to Gonne;
Fresh Perspectives on Nineteenth-Century Ireland

Edited by

Paddy Lyons, Willy Maley and John Miller

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P U B L I S H I N G

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Fresh Perspectives on Nineteenth-Century Ireland,
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for

Katie Gough

who raised the tone and kept us going

*Romantic Ireland's dead and gone,
It's with O'Leary in the grave.*
(WB Yeats, 'September 1913')

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PART I:
HISTORY

INTRODUCTION TO PART I: HISTORY

PADDY LYONS, JOHN MILLER
AND WILLY MALEY

The long nineteenth century is arguably the most significant period in Irish history, a sustained epoch of trauma and transformation fringed by union and independence and marked by a series of events that changed the political landscape of the nation forever, giving rise to art and ideas of international importance, and laying the foundations for independence. At one end of this tumultuous period we have Grattan's Parliament, the United Irishmen, the Rebellion of 1798 led by Wolfe Tone, and the Union of 1801, and at the other the fall of Parnell, the Easter Rising, Civil War and partition. Between times there are the great hinge events of Catholic Emancipation, the Famine, and the Land War. From Wolfe Tone to Maud Gonne, Ireland went through a period of enormous upheaval that carved out the culture and politics of the modern nation. Irish Studies as a field of inquiry has not yet fully engaged with the range and richness of material in this period. Nor have critics in the various Anglophone literary fields of the period yet grasped the full extent to which Irish and Scottish events and authors contributed decisively to the development of their own areas, and that despite the best efforts of scholars such as Seamus Deane, Marianne Elliott, Luke Gibbons, Nigel Leask, Murray Pittock, and Katie Trumpener. Romanticism and Victorianism are only ever partially understood independent of events and artistic developments in Ireland and Scotland.

Bringing together an international line-up of established and emerging scholars, *Romantic Ireland: From Tone to Gonne* sets out the case for Ireland as a shaping force in the period and takes Irish Studies in new directions, in particular in terms of a cross-cultural comparison with Scotland and the distinct phenomenon of Unionism, thus breaking out of the binaries and double binds of Anglo-Irish approaches. Irish-Scottish Studies is a fresh field of investigation that throws up a number of fascinating insights that enhance our awareness of the interaction between colonialism, nationalism and culture.

Most of the essays gathered here are the fruits of the Annual Conference of the Society for the Study of Nineteenth-Century Ireland, held at the University of Glasgow from 22-24 June 2007. The conference title, *Romantic Ireland: From Tone to Gonne*, played with a couplet from Yeats that acted to close history down and draw a line under the past:

*Romantic Ireland's dead and gone,
It's with O'Leary in the grave.*

(Yeats, 'September 1913')

The conference, and the essays arising from it, open up and explore the material culture, in all its manifestations, of Romantic Ireland from Tone to Gonne. Since the venue was Glasgow there was inevitably an emphasis on Irish-Scottish relations in the period, for as well as being the Second City of Empire, Glasgow was a major centre of Irish immigration in the nineteenth century. Sligo's Brother Walfrid was a founder of Celtic Football Club, and Michael Davitt was one of its patrons. More recently, the St Andrew's Agreement shows the extent to which Scottish Devolution has acted as a model for the new Northern Ireland Assembly, while the setting up of an Irish Consulate in Edinburgh adds to a sense of an Irish-Scottish connection that refreshes Anglo-Irish relations that had arguably gone stale. The Bloomsday celebrations in Glasgow on 16th June 2007 were followed by a week of Irish cultural activities, culminating in this major international conference. The Society for the Study of Nineteenth-Century Ireland began holding annual conferences in the early 1990s – firstly in Ireland and then rotating between Ireland, Europe and America. From these conferences more than a dozen volumes have already been published, helping to place this field at the cutting edge of Irish studies. The published proceedings of the Glasgow conference will further enhance this rapidly growing field. As conference organizers, we took a broad and long view of the nineteenth century and welcomed proposals for papers and panels in every area and across disciplines investigating nineteenth-century Irish Studies.

In 'Foreseeing the Famine?', the first essay in a section on 'Class, Colonialism and Republicanism', Alex Benchimol engages with what might appear at first an unlikely topic in Irish Studies, the work of English patriot William Cobbett. While Cobbett is most noted for his critique of British agricultural policy in the 1830 *Rural Rides*, Benchimol situates his work in a broader context, drawing in particular on Cobbett's letters to his farmhand in Surrey, Charles Marshall, during an 1834 visit to Ireland. The juxtaposition of agricultural abundance and desperate poverty he encountered strikingly illustrates the extended geographical reach of the

rural crises produced in the transition to industrial modernity and facilitated most notably by the combined influences of Malthusianism, free trade and debt finance. Some ten years before the onset of the great famine, Cobbett's analysis of an agrarian capitalism in the service of an absentee elite provides a telling commentary on the conditions which made it possible.

Like Benchimol's essay, Willy Maley's account of 'Engels and the History of Ireland' is grounded in soil. Engel's *History of Ireland* is an unfinished work of 1869-70 that stemmed from a preoccupation with Ireland manifested elsewhere in a chapter on Irish immigrants in the 1845 *Condition of the Working Class in England* and in his 1870 notes for an unpublished preface to a German edition of Thomas Moore's *Melodies*. Behind Engels's belief in Ireland's revolutionary potential is an analysis of its political geography, extending across agriculture, geology and even the Irish weather, as Engels charts the ways in which Ireland's natural resources were conscripted and manipulated by colonial power. The notes for the *History of Ireland* go no further than 1646 but Maley draws on other sources, including letters to Marx and others, to situate Engels's cultural materialist standpoint in debates in nineteenth-century Irish history, particularly as they stand in Goldwin Smith and Roy Foster's less politically astute work.

James Quinn's essay on John Mitchel's life and letters continues the discussion of revolutionary agendas in nineteenth-century Ireland. Mitchel's bellicose brand of militant republicanism often involved sharp criticism of his supposedly emasculated fellow countrymen's perceived lack of commitment to freeing themselves from their fate. His escape from a penal colony in Van Diemen's Land to which he was transported following a sedition charge provides an international context for the ideas of this 'unsystematic thinker'. Turning to Mitchel's later life in New York and Tennessee, Quinn details his perhaps surprising support for the Confederacy and for the institution of slavery, connecting this reactionary politics to the idealization of a pre-modern, agrarian and classical past, which he aspired to for Ireland.

In Section Two on 'Faith, Fatherland and Fartherlands', a wider international context is also at issue in Elizabeth Boyle's account of nineteenth-century approaches to medieval Irish culture, as she charts the influence of political and cultural factors such as romantic nationalism, Orientalism and sectarianism. Boyle exemplifies some of the divergent agendas at work in Irish medievalism through discussion of two distinct readings of *Scéla na esérge*, an eleventh-century Middle Irish account of the physical resurrection of mankind at Judgement Day. While the Gaelic-

speaking Catholic John O'Beirne Crowe saw in the manuscript the 'oneness of the faith of the Catholic Church of the present day with the ancient Church of our fathers', the Anglo-Indian civil servant Whitley Stokes saw evidence of a more eclectic past, locating connections to the Vedas, the Talmud and the Koran. The resurrection of medieval Irish literature, therefore, is deeply involved with the disparate concerns of nineteenth-century Ireland.

Stokes figures also in Patrick Maume's study of John Healy, Catholic bishop of Clonfert and Archbishop of Tuam. For Healy, Stokes was too original a scholar, a position which encapsulates an overarching conservatism in Healy's outlook. A supporter of home rule and disliked by many nationalists, Healy's central concern was to refute Protestant accounts of St Patrick. Devoting a large proportion of his time to visiting ancient monastic sites as part of what Maume terms his 'reactionary escapism', Healy presented an idealised version of the pre-Viking church, often expressing a desire to retire to a hermitage as he remained determinedly backward looking.

Robbie McLaughlan's essay on Scottish Presbyterians and Irish Immigrants turns to the literature of evangelism as an aspect of colonialist discourse, demonstrating the intertextual connections between stereotyping imperial representations of African natives and the Catholic Irish. To a Presbyterian hierarchy, the wave of Irish migration to Glasgow and other Scottish cities appeared as nothing less than a 'moral virus', bringing decay, impurity and drunkenness to corrode Protestant respectability. The growth of the home missionary enterprise to counter this peril, especially in Glasgow's East End, focused on a raft of social reforms. As the century progressed the rise of the labour movement and the increasing popularity of secular leisure pursuits provided alternative theatres for social concern and resulted in a decline in the dissenting Presbyterian tradition.

In the third section on 'Fenianism and Football', Glasgow is also the home for Terence McBride's discussion of the influence of Irish associational culture on a sense of Irish political identity. Focusing on the National Brotherhood of St Patrick (NBSP) and a local 'Irish National Association of Scotland' (INA), McBride analyses a variety of factors behind the public assertion of a common Irishness, encompassing political and cultural components and the increasing emphasis on social respectability and cohesion.

Ryan Keating explores the contribution of Fenianism to the intellectual formation of Irish nationalism in the lead-up to independence. Keating contends that notwithstanding the tendency of historians to fixate on later developments such as the emergence of Sinn Féin, the Gaelic Athletic

Association and the Gaelic League, the roots of the Easter Rising and its aftermath go much deeper, into the soil of the 1860s. The Fenians and Irish Republican Brotherhood laid the groundwork of a modern national consciousness by mapping out an imagined community with international appeal that amounted to 'a trans-national and trans-generational movement'.

Joseph Bradley's essay also turns to Irishness and associational culture in Scotland through a discussion of the Gaelic Athletic Association, asking in particular why soccer flourished among Irish settlers at the expense of Gaelic sports. Considering the history of the GAA alongside the rise of Glasgow Celtic Football Club, the sporting 'jewel in the crown of the Irish diaspora', Bradley analyses the development of Celtic FC as the key sporting location for a sense of Irish identity in Scotland.

The following section on 'Reinventing the Past' opens with Patricia McKee Hanna's reassessment of the Biblical scholar and antiquarian James Henthorn Todd in relation to the work of other members of this large family of Scottish Protestant origins. Henthorn's wide-ranging and influential activities (including the restoration of *The Book of Kells*) in the context of the Irish university intellectual revival is situated by McKee Hanna in a broader network of relations, connected both to the Oxford movement and enlightenment culture in Edinburgh.

Murdo Macdonald's and Per Ahlander's contributions turn to the revival of Celtic arts in Scotland. Macdonald's essay investigates the engagement with Celtic art that underpinned its revival, beginning with the work of Alexander Gordon in the eighteenth century whose depictions of Pictish carvings revealed an interest in Celtic antiquities as well as the more commonly thought of Roman artefacts. The publication of Macpherson's *Ossian* in the 1760s gives momentum to interest in Celtic art, but it was not until the mid-nineteenth century that studies had advanced sufficiently far to enable a revival. MacDonald focuses on the 1890s as the key decade of the revival and ends on the cusp of modernism.

Ahlander meanwhile focuses on cultural exchange between Edinburgh and Dublin around 1900, particularly with regard to the Arts and Crafts movement. Exploring such figures as Phoebe Anna Traquair, Marjory Kennedy-Fraser and Patrick Geddes, Ahlander elucidates the network of connections around vibrant revivalist cultures in Ireland and Scotland that also involved such notable figures as Yeats, Lady Gregory and William Sharp.

Opening the final section of 'Backward Looks', Alison O'Malley-Younger revisits Theobald Wolfe Tone from the perspective of 1898, a hundred years after his death, homing in on the ways in which Tone was 'commodified, repackaged, mass produced and marketed as a tourist

attraction and spectacle'. The centenary of the tumultuous events of 1798 saw an explosion of patriotic interest in popular media, in part as a response to the hullabaloo of Queen Victoria's diamond jubilee the previous year in which Maud Gonne, Yeats and others had endeavoured to disturb this imperial spectacle. The emergence of a 'Buy Irish' campaign to offset this festival of commodities reprises Tone's desire to foster Irish independence. Central to this was the romantic nationalist, Alice Milligan, whose pamphlet *Life of Theobald Wolfe Tone* contains a number of advertisements for Irish products as she set about 'creat[ing] a monument to the future in the past and market[ing] it in the present'.

Jason King's essay traces the relationships between Romantic Scottish and Irish emigration narratives and questions of national identity. Both Edward Allen Talbot's narrative of leaving Ireland, *Five Years Residence in the Canadas* (1824), and John Galt's fictional account of departing Scotland, *Bogle Corbet* (1831), are expressly conceived as didactic works in favour of colonization, although the depressive attitude of both authors towards their subject, what King calls the 'anxiety of displacement', may seem to undercut this intention. Nonetheless, rather than uncovering a political radicalism that emerges in the movement from old world to new, King discovers an elegiac nostalgia that informs a political quietism as national identity is subsumed into an ideal of imperial service.

Finally, Ann Matthews brings new archival research to bear to explore Maud Gonne's self-invention. While existing studies of Gonne's life have tended towards a romanticised view, Matthews offers a detailed account of Gonne's family and of her own account of herself in her 1938 autobiography. Contrary to Gonne's own statement she was not, Matthews argues, the sole founder of women's nationalist movement *Inghinidhe na hÉireann* (Daughters of Erin).

Taken together, these essays constitute a timely and important collective intervention in the history of the long nineteenth century, teasing out the tangled threads of a period in which the dramatic transformation of the Irish landscape was accompanied both by persistent survivals from the past and by tantalising hints at possible futures. The road to independence had its roots in the late eighteenth century, and this collection of essays charts that complex trajectory from rural rides to roads not taken.

The editors wish to thank Cliona Manahan, Consul General of Ireland to Scotland (2005-2010), for supporting this project.

I.

CLASS, COLONIALISM, AND REPUBLICANISM

CHAPTER ONE

FORESEEING THE FAMINE?: WILLIAM COBBETT'S IRISH WRITINGS

ALEX BENCHIMOL

The English Radical journalist and reform campaigner William Cobbett is an unlikely subject for a paper delivered at an Irish Studies conference. Firstly, Cobbett was an unabashed English patriot whose writing celebrated the traditional virtues of the Yeomanry class of England's southern rural counties that he viewed as the moral and material backbone of the nation. Cobbett also maintained a political vision throughout the early nineteenth century, that, despite his many radical beliefs – or, indeed, perhaps because of them – put the old eighteenth-century Tory cause of King and Country at its centre. A fierce opponent of Empire and free trade, he was perhaps most renowned as a leading critic of the new commercial ideology that was rapidly replacing the customary moral economy at work in the countryside throughout the British Isles, as well as a steadfast champion of those who were oppressed, marginalized and displaced by the new industrial and imperial order. In short, he was made a radical by the unprecedented social and economic transformations of his age, and, perhaps more than any other intellectual in early nineteenth-century Britain, provided a sustained critique of the corrupt political system that he felt was responsible for these changes.

Although Cobbett was first and foremost concerned with the destruction of the self-sustaining communities of rural England caught up in Britain's transition to industrial modernity – a process that he famously depicted in his series of articles for the *Political Register*, later collected in 1830 as *Rural Rides* – he also recognised that this was a global process, affecting every corner of the British Isles as well as its imperial territories, and therefore requiring a systematic and comprehensive intellectual response. When he travelled to Scotland in 1832 and to Ireland two years later, reporting back his observations to the *Register* in both cases, it merely confirmed to him that the social distress he witnessed first-hand a

decade earlier in southern England was not confined to these rural English counties, but was part of a much larger and more complex system of political corruption and economic exploitation in the British Isles; a system designed and run by a new class of financiers, economists, and merchants from London who enjoyed the full protection and encouragement of the British state, against the interests of what he saw as the productive classes in the countryside responsible for the real material wealth and well-being of the nation. Above all he recognized that this was a war of one class upon another, throughout the British Isles, and sought to expose and attack those ideologies and agents he felt were most directly complicit in the exploitation of the rural workers and the destruction of a sustainable economy in the countryside.

Of the many contemporary ideas associated with the new system of political economy, it was the infernal ideological triumvirate of Malthusianism, free trade and debt finance that he felt was principally responsible for the widespread material deprivation he observed in the rural landscape. The ruthless imposition of this new economic system in the countryside produced many of the most shocking asymmetries to be found there: mass starvation amidst agricultural abundance; wholesale rural depopulation occurring simultaneously with the expansion of landed estates, often run by absentee landlords in London; and the breakdown of integrated local agricultural economies in favour of a new export-driven agrarian capitalism. These were the contradictions most commented upon by Cobbett in *Rural Rides*, but they also feature strongly in his *Tour In Scotland* and his letters from Ireland.

Of course, the issue of rural poverty would take on a whole new dimension in Ireland, particularly in the Famine decade of the 1840s when tens of thousands of agricultural refugees from the Irish countryside were driven away into expanding British and American cities, while many of those who remained starved to death or were driven to economic self-destruction. This whole process of rural social and economic destruction that we now call the Irish Famine was managed by a Whig Government in London in thrall to *laissez faire* economics, for the benefit of the British capitalist system of the mid-nineteenth century, then at the starting point of a sustained period of imperial economic expansion. But it's important to recall that many of the most appalling social and economic asymmetries from this period of Irish history – and perhaps none stands out so much as the mass export of grain, by British military escort, amidst the mass starvation of the native rural population – were also the structural features of a new form of agricultural capitalism noted by Cobbett in his writings from the 1820s and 1830s. In this essay I want to examine the

development of Cobbett's critique of British agricultural policy in the early nineteenth century, culminating in his major work of social criticism, *Rural Rides* (1830), in relation to his writing on the state of the rural poor in Ireland in 1834, the same year the Malthusian-inspired Poor Law Amendment was passed. In particular I want to highlight how Cobbett's analysis of agricultural poverty and the decimation of rural economies depicted in *Rural Rides* informs his critique of political and economic relations in pre-famine Ireland, giving us an insight into the social conditions that would exacerbate the effects of catastrophic crop failure.

After returning from his second political exile in America in 1819, Cobbett wanted to see first-hand how much the agrarian culture of England had changed during the postwar years under the accumulated social and economic pressures of deflation, taxation, mass unemployment, depopulation and the transition to a paper money economy. This was a time when the entire structure of labour relations in the countryside was being transformed by measures like the Corn Law of 1815. The new statute protected the economic position of the landed elite and forced many rural labourers into a permanent relationship of dependence, just when cuts in Poor Law relief were being implemented. Equally debilitating to the material welfare of the agricultural worker was the inevitable transition to an industrial manufacturing economy and the attendant demands of bankers and financiers on agricultural production. At the heart of the new capitalist system as Cobbett saw it was a conglomeration of war profiteers, debt financiers, enclosing landowners, government placemen, and stockbrokers, who together facilitated a redistribution of wealth away from the traditional agricultural sector in the countryside towards a parasitic new financial elite in London.

The article series that emerged out of Cobbett's travels through England's agricultural heartland in the 1820s, later collected as *Rural Rides*, was an opportunity to educate a popular radical audience both about the vanishing pre-industrial economy at work in the countryside as well as the reasons for its eclipse by the new forces of wealth accumulation. A good example can be found in a ride through West Sussex from the summer of 1823 where Cobbett focuses on the changing pattern of social and economic relations in rural England. Prompted by his observation of a local woman bleaching her home-spun and home-woven linens, Cobbett's thoughts are turned to the 'Lords of the Loom', those new magnates of the commercial woollen and linen industries. He is convinced that this new industrial elite has undermined a key aspect of rural domestic industry, and in the process 'taken from the land ... this part of its due; and hence one cause of the poverty, misery, and pauperism, that are becoming so frightful

throughout the country' (Cobbett, 1830: 60). He goes on to decry the social and economic asymmetries promoted by the industrial system, arguing that the financial superstructure sustained by the national debt has served the needs of a parasitic new class in the cities, far removed from the increasing material degradation of the countryside. For Cobbett the overall effect of this process on the delicate social equilibrium in rural England is obvious:

The country people lose part of their natural employment. The women and children, who ought to provide a great part of the raiment, have nothing to do. The fields *must have men and boys*; but, where there are men and boys there will be *women and girls*; and, as the Lords of the Loom have now a set of *real slaves*, by the means of whom they take away a great part of the employment of the country-*women and girls*, these must be kept by poor-rates in whatever degree they lose employment through the Lords of the Loom. (Cobbett, 1830: 61)

For Cobbett, there is a direct correlation between the expansion of industrial economies in England's towns and cities and the social and economic decline simultaneously occurring in the countryside, with the latter being increasingly stripped of its material wealth, human capital and cultural autonomy.

In another passage from the same ride, Cobbett surveys the demise of the rural gentry, independent farmers, and freeholders, as well as their corresponding family-based systems of ownership. For him it is the new financial elite produced by the corrupt system of wartime capitalism that is most responsible for the destruction of these self-sustaining and interdependent economies, as well as the resulting impoverishment of the countryside. The insidious social effects of wartime debt finance are made obvious for the reader:

this is the way that our crew *beat* the people of France. They laid out, in the first place, *six hundred millions* which they borrowed, and for which they *mortgaged* the revenues of the nation. Then they contracted for a *dead weight* to the amount of *one hundred and fifty millions*. Then they stripped the *labouring classes* of the commons, of their kettles, their bedding, their beer-barrels; and, in short, made them all paupers, and thus fixed on the nation a permanent annual charge of about 8 or 9 *millions*, or, a gross debt of 200,000,000*l*. (Cobbett, 1830: 66-7)

The straightforward causality Cobbett posits between wartime debt finance and rural impoverishment may seem simplistic and overstated to the modern observer, but to contemporary plebeian readers it provided an

accessible rationale and compelling basis for collective mobilization against a fundamentally corrupt political and economic system.

Cobbett's critique of the new form of agrarian capitalism entrenching itself in England's rural heartland culminates in a ride through the valley of Avon, in Wiltshire, in 1826. During the journey he makes a visual survey of the valley, noting the pleasing signs of its productive rural economy: 'The stack-yards down this Valley are beautiful to behold. They contain from *five to fifteen* banging *wheat-ricks*, besides *barley-ricks*, and *hay-ricks*, and also besides the *contents of the barns*, many of which exceed *a hundred*, some *two hundred*' (Cobbett, 1830: 362-3). When he considers the human dimension of this landscape, however, Cobbett's mood turns to rage over Malthusian-inspired Government policies that threaten the destruction of rural community through the 'managed' depopulation of the countryside:

A very fine sight this was, and it could not meet the eye without making one look round (and in vain) *to see the people who were to eat all this food*; and without making one reflect on the horrible, the unnatural, the base and infamous state, in which we must be, when projects are on foot, and are openly avowed, for *transporting* those who raise this food, *because they want to eat enough of it to keep them alive*; and when no project is on foot for *transporting* the idlers who live in luxury upon this same food; when no project is on foot for transporting pensioners, parsons, or-dead weight people! (Cobbett, 1830: 363)

By calculating the provisions for an average agricultural worker's family in the context of overall food production in the local parish of Milton, Cobbett illustrates for his readers the corrupt moral logic of an economic system that promotes simultaneous surplus in the cities and deprivation in the countryside. Inviting them to share in his outrage, he writes: 'What injustice, what a hellish system it must be, to make those who raise it *skin and bone and nakedness*, while the food and drink and wool are almost all carried away to be heaped on the fund-holders, pensioners, soldiers, dead-weight, and other swarms of tax-eaters! If such an operation do not need putting an end to, then the devil himself is a saint' (Cobbett, 1830: 372). Here we have, in these passages from *Rural Rides*, the essential aspects of Cobbett's critique of British agricultural policy in the early nineteenth century; a policy based on the new economic imperatives of free trade and deficit finance, driven by industrial expansion in Britain's cities and towns, and administered by a social regime consisting of new forms of poverty relief that would culminate in the Poor Law Amendment of 1834 as well as the managed depopulation of the countryside – through 'natural attrition' (starvation), mass emigration and forced relocation.

Cobbett's crusade to challenge and overthrow this developing agrarian capitalist system led him to both new forms of agitation – resulting in his election to Parliament in 1832 as a Radical member for Oldham at the age of 69 – as well as on a wider search for rural impoverishment in the British Isles, including an 1832 tour of Scotland. He also became increasingly concerned with Irish social and political issues, based in part on his involvement in the campaign for Catholic emancipation. This interest led to an alliance in the new Reform parliament with the prominent Irish radical and nationalist politician Daniel O'Connell, and to the final sustained political campaign of Cobbett's life: to raise an awareness amongst British labourers of the economic exploitation and political repression of the Irish people, and the desperate state of the rural population in particular. In a series of letters written from Ireland to his farmhand in Surrey during the autumn of 1834, later published in the *Political Register*, Cobbett would detail the alarming results of British economic policy in the Irish countryside, mapping for his working-class readers the desperate social conditions, which, a decade later, would exacerbate the effects of catastrophic crop failure that led up to the Famine.

Cobbett's visit to Ireland was prompted by a desire, as he put in the *Political Register*, 'to see this country with my own eyes; to judge for myself, and to give a true account of it, as far as I am able, to the people of England' (Cobbett, 1984: 31). What he noted during his tour, recorded in letters to his farmworker in Surrey, Charles Marshall, that were published in the *Register*, as well as in his many speeches and lectures (which he wished to collect in book form under the title *Ireland's Woes; A Warning to England*), was a much more brutal version of the free market agrarian capitalist model that he had become familiar with in his travels around England for *Rural Rides*. In his opening letter to Marshall, written from Dublin, Cobbett's first impressions are of a country blessed with agricultural assets, yet mired in widespread poverty: 'the grass here is the finest that I ever saw in my life; six acres of it worth more than my twenty acres ... Here are as fine beef and oats in abundance. The causes of this strange state of things, I have come hither to endeavour to ascertain, and to offer to this suffering people my opinions as to the remedies that ought to be applied' (Cobbett, 1984: 45). In a Dublin lecture a week later, also published in the *Register*, Cobbett highlights the fundamental contradiction of Ireland's situation: 'of all the wonders of the world Ireland is the greatest, for here we see a country teeming with food; we see that food sent in to other nations, in many parts of the globe, and we see at home the people starving and in rags, and without ever partaking of that food which

their country produces' (Cobbett, 1984: 67). Here we see Cobbett first rehearse his critique of the free trade system which has impoverished the country's poor while enriching its absentee elite; a critique that he would develop and amplify as he investigated the state of the rural poor outside of the capital.

On his trip from Dublin to Kilkenny Cobbett surveys the condition of the labourers in the country. He writes to his Surrey farmhand of houses 'made of rough stone and mud' with rafters of rotting back thatch (Cobbett, 1984: 82). Inside these dwellings he finds primitive living conditions, with seats of stone and a board for eating. He is most shocked to find a pig in many of these dwellings: 'the pig stands and is helped by some one, and sometimes he eats out of the pot. He goes in and out and about the hole, like one of the family; the family sleep, huddled up together, on dead weeds or a little straw in one corner of the hole, and the pig, on a similar bed, in another corner'. The inference to be taken from these observations is quite clear: 'The pig is the person of most consequence; he is sold to *pay the rent*: if he fail, the family are turned out into the naked air to perish, which has been the case in many thousands of instances, there being *no poor-law* here to save their lives' (Cobbett, 1984: 83). In an export-driven agricultural economy the rural poor of Ireland are comprehensively dehumanized, sacrificing their own meager diet and living space for the benefit of a prized commodity, to be enjoyed by a rapacious elite in the expanding cities of the British Isles.

In another letter Cobbett reports on the conditions of the farmers of the country. His observations on the state of this class – for Cobbett the material and moral backbone of society – further illustrates the fundamental injustice at the heart of the Irish agricultural economy:

The farmer and his family are all in half nakedness or rags; their lot is little better than the mere labourers. They raise wheat and barley and oats and butter and pork in great abundance; but never do they *taste* any of either, except, perchance, a small part of the meal of the *oats*. Potatoes are their sole food. I wish the farmers of our parish could see the one that I saw in the fine county of KILKENNY. His dress was a mere bundle of rags, tied round his body with a band of straw; his legs and feet bare, no shirt, and his head covered with a rag, such as you would rip out of the inside of an old cart-saddle. (Cobbett, 1984: 92-3)

For Cobbett the immiseration of the Irish farmers is a sure sign of the immorality and inefficiency of the agricultural model imported from across the Irish Sea. Indeed, in the same letter he comments on the unparalleled natural resources of the country, remarking that in his travels across 180 miles of Ireland, taking in the counties of Wicklow, Kildare,

Carlow, Kilkenny and Waterford, he 'never passed over any 50 miles, in my life, any 50 *unbroken miles*, of land so good on an average during the whole way, as these 180 miles' – a remarkable admission from one of the most prolific agricultural travel writers of the nineteenth century (Cobbett, 1984: 93). He ends the letter with a cautionary – and tragically prescient – account of the staple crop and food of the rural poor in pre-Famine Ireland, the potato. Cobbett writes: 'There are here, as there are in England, several sorts of potatoes: some are called *minions*, others *apple-potatoes*; these are the best. Others are called *lumpers*; and these are the *worst*. When men or women are employed, at six-pence a day and their board, to dig *minions* or *apple-potatoes*, they are not suffered to *taste them*, but are sent to another field to dig *lumpers* to eat; and this is called *boarding them*!' Significantly, Cobbett goes on to link the spread of this monocrop food staple in rural Ireland to the Malthusian-inspired Whig social policies associated with Scottish political economy – policies that were being implemented throughout the British Isles – warning his Surrey farmhand that 'it is enough for you to know that THAT is what the Scotch vagabonds mean when they propose to bring you to "COARSER food": it is enough for you to know THAT to *rouse you all to a sense of your danger*, and to urge you to come to a *county-meeting* and to do your duty' (Cobbett, 1984: 94). He concludes the letter in typical Cobbett fashion, bringing together politics and the everyday practicalities of agricultural labour through a ban on his Surrey farm against the cultivation and consumption of potatoes, 'that accursed root without which Ireland could not have been brought to its present state' (Cobbett, 1984: 95).

In his fifth letter Cobbett deepens his critique of the state of economic and social relations in the Irish countryside. In the market town of Clonmell, he visits a purpose built slaughterhouse for the processing of up to sixty thousand hogs per year, reminding him of the structural inequalities he has observed throughout his tour of rural Ireland:

Every ounce of this meat is sent out of Ireland, while the poor half-naked creatures, who raise it with such care, are compelled to live on the *lumpers*, which are such bad potatoes, that the hogs will not thrive on them, and will not touch them, if they can get other potatoes. The *rooks*, which eat the good potatoes, will not eat these, though they be starving. And, yet, this is the stuff that the working people are fed on. There are about *eighty thousand firkins of butter*, and, perhaps, *a hundred thousand quarters of wheat*, and more of *oats*, sent away out of this one town; while those who raise it all by their labour, live upon *lumpers*! (Cobbett, 1984: 122)

For the benefit of his Surrey farmhand Cobbett outlines the pernicious economic system which informs this oppressive relationship between landlord and worker:

You will think it strange, that all this food should be sent out of the country, and that the people should *get nothing back* for it. You will think, that we must send them *clothes and household goods and tea and sugar and soap* in return for the hogs and other things. To the *rich* we do ... but, the millions of working people have only rags for parts of their bodies, and they have neither goods nor tea nor sugar nor plate nor knife nor fork nor tea-kettle nor cup nor saucer.

The case is this: the owners of all the great estates *live in England or in France or in Italy*. The *rents are sent to them*; and, as there are *no poor-rates*, they get all the produce of the land from the miserable farmer, except just enough to keep him alive. They *spend these rents out of Ireland*; so that the working people here, who might eat meat three times a day, are compelled to live upon *lumpers*! (Cobbett, 1984: 122-3)

In the same letter Cobbett describes an extensive military barracks in Fermoy, capable, on his estimation, of housing at least forty thousand soldiers, or enough necessary, he hints darkly to his farmhand, for enforcing this subservient relationship on the working labourers of the area if they ever grow tired of living on potatoes (Cobbett, 1984: 122).

Toward the end of his Irish tour Cobbett published an open letter in the *Political Register* in defence of the radical Irish nationalist Daniel O'Connell in which he provides an impassioned summary of his observations on the state of Ireland's rural poor. Perhaps most significantly, for the first time, he explicitly links the appalling material conditions of the Irish peasantry to the wider political relationship between Ireland and Britain and, in the process, anticipates the ideological complicity between the elites of both countries which would allow widespread crop failure, a decade later, to degenerate into the worst humanitarian crisis in Europe of the nineteenth century. Cobbett directly addresses his letter to 'The Sensible and Just People of England', laying out before them the complex hierarchy of exploitation in Ireland, and the political system directed from London that has made it all possible. He writes:

You will easily suppose that it must be a prime object with the sons and daughters of corruption, with those who wish Ireland to be kept in the state which I have described to you in my letters to my labourer, Marshall; who wish that the great landowners of Ireland may continue to draw away all the fruits of this fine country while those who till the land are driven to live upon food worse than that of the hogs which they rear to be sent

away; who wish even the farmers of Ireland to be a great swarm of beggars, not tasting meat nor bread from year's end to year's end, and the greater part of them clothed worse than the common beggars in England; who wish that the landowners of Ireland may still possess the power of driving the people off the land of their birth, and compelling them to perish with hunger, and with cold on the bare ground, or to go to foreign lands there to perish, or perish on board a crowded and filthy ship; who wish that the people of Ireland may still be compelled to render tithes to a church to which they do not belong, and which they hold in abhorrence. (Cobbett, 1984: 159)

Here, in a letter directed at a sympathetic British working-class public, Cobbett exposes those English and Scottish defenders of the brutal new form of agrarian capitalism he has witnessed first hand in Ireland, implicitly challenging them to justify their economic and social policies in the country based on anything more than entrenched political corruption and personal greed. He is, in short, offering them the opportunity to re-examine the basis of an agricultural system that has already led to widespread poverty and social dislocation throughout the country, and could potentially lead to even more devastation.

The political elite that responded to the Irish Famine in the latter half of the 1840s was part of the same Whig establishment that Cobbett confronted in his Irish writings, and, like their predecessors in Government from Cobbett's time, shared a fervent ideological attachment to the free trade economic system and Malthusian social policies which many of its leading intellectuals deemed essential to Britain's status as a modern imperial superpower. The effects of these economic and social policies were apparent in the decimation of local agricultural systems and the endemic rural poverty observed by Cobbett in his travels throughout England, Scotland and Ireland. The most appalling manifestation of this new economic world view, however, only became widely apparent during the Famine years, when the Whig Government of Russell, guided by the *laissez-faire* advice of the then chief assistant to the Treasury Sir Charles Trevelyan, reversed relief policies initiated by the Peel Government, controlling food depots in order to maintain the profit margins of private traders at the expense of the starving masses in the countryside. Indeed, some in the government, as Christine Kinealy has argued in *The Great Calamity*, saw the Famine as 'an opportunity to facilitate various long-desired changes within Ireland', including 'population control and the consolidation of property' culminating in the 1847 New Poor Law Extension, which led to mass evictions throughout the country (Brantlinger 195; Kinealy, 353). Although Cobbett may not have imagined that the fundamental agricultural imbalances he highlighted in 1834 could

lead to such widespread catastrophe, it does seem clear when examining his Irish writings that he did provide the essential critique – some ten years before the onset of the Famine – of the structural conditions that made the crisis possible.

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