

Introduction

History provides many examples of famines that cost more human lives than the Great Irish Famine. Reliable evidence on famine casualties tends to be skimpy, but fine comparisons are not called for: enough to note that in northern China in 1877–8 a famine accounted for 9 to 13 million deaths, and in 1932–3 in the Ukraine another for probably at least 3 million; or that, by a recent reckoning, the dreadful Bengali famine of 1940–3 carried off 10 millions. In this league of doom the cost of Ireland's misfortune – about one million lives – may seem small. Measured in proportionate terms, however, the Irish famine's toll exceeded these others, though even in Ireland itself, a lesser-known famine in 1740–1 may have killed a higher share of the people. Still, the 'Great Hunger' has gained wider and more lasting notoriety than most famines. There are several reasons for this. The first is its popularity as a case study in Malthusian exegesis. The price paid by the reckless Irish for their high nuptiality and their large families – both widely noted at the time – is often singled out as a particularly stark instance of the 'principle of population' in action. Second, to students of economics everywhere the Famine recalls an example, however dubious, of that elusive phenomenon, the 'Giffen' good (*).¹ The Irish poor, so it was claimed, in desperation flouted the law of demand by demanding more potatoes as their price rose. Third, to proponents of an old-time, nationalist version of Irish history, the Famine is central. It is the historical wrong that sealed the fate of the unhappy Union between Britain

¹ Terms marked with a star are explained in the glossary.

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and Ireland: a partner so uncaring in time of need deserved no loyalty from Irishmen.

Yet another reason for the Famine's notoriety is its lateness and context. Famine had effectively disappeared from England by 1600 and from most of Scotland by 1700. Elsewhere in western Europe, the *crises de subsistence* of the eighteenth century were minor affairs by comparison. Far worse, at least in relative terms, than the misnamed 'last great subsistence crisis of the western world' – the famine affecting much of Europe in 1816–19 – the Great Irish Famine struck in what was, after all, the back garden of 'the workshop of the world'. While plans for a 'Great Exhibition' were being hatched in London, thousands were still dying of famine diseases in Ireland. Yet Ireland had been a fully fledged member of the United Kingdom since 1801. The Famine is thus a reminder of how unevenly the benefits of the Industrial Revolution had diffused by the 1840s. Finally, most famines in history have been the product of either bad weather or the effects of war and politics. But the Irish famine had an unusual origin: it was set off by an ecological disaster. For all these reasons, Ireland's Great Famine is familiar.

Curiously, the tragedy has attracted little serious academic research. In Ireland itself the neglect is striking. The professional journals there rarely feature the Famine, and the fullest narrative account of it is by a non-specialist, Cecil Woodham-Smith, who was drawn to the topic by her interest in the third Earl of Lucan (of Crimean War fame). Here is an instance, then, where Clio's Irish devotees have by and large heeded the maxim that 'Anglo-Irish history is for Englishmen to remember, for Irishmen to forget'.² But if Irish historians have focused their researches on other, often less controversial matters, a populist and sometimes facile understanding of the tragedy still permeates Irish folk memory. Half-truths about shiploads of grain leaving the country, about a callous and indolent landlordism, and about Queen Victoria subscribing a £5 note to Famine relief are common currency: so are true tales of famine graves and mass evictions. For Ireland today these stories are the Famine's most enduring legacy. Perhaps because such stories are prone to take on a nationalist twist, scholarly Irish

² H. Plunkett (1904) *Ireland in the New Century* (Dublin), p. 26.

assessments of the Famine years tend to be detached and clinical; indeed, their ‘generosity and restraint’ have been applauded by Woodham-Smith (Woodham-Smith, 1962, 75–6), and debunking the populist version of folklorists and novelists is their driving theme. Ironically Woodham-Smith’s own much-read account, which dwelt on horrific depictions of the crisis and on administrative culpability and ineptitude, was poorly received – or, worse, ignored – by Irish academic historians for being too ‘emotive’ and ‘simplistic’. The condescending review in *Irish Historical Studies*³ was typical, but perhaps the essay topic set for University College Dublin history students in one of their final exams in 1963 – ‘*The Great Hunger* is a great novel’ – best captures the tone of indignant ridicule that greeted it. The gap between popular perception and classroom orthodoxy has endured: in a 1986 survey poor Woodham-Smith is dismissed in one withering footnote (Daly, 1986, 136).

When the mysterious fungus *Phytophthora infestans* reached Ireland in August 1845 the potato, which produced the nutritional value of corn at about one-third the cost, was the main food of well over half its people. This left the poor, whose income was largely determined by the cost of growing potatoes, no prospect of trading down to a cheaper food. Bad harvests three years in succession thus posed an unprecedented challenge for relief agencies, and arguably made disaster inevitable. To that extent the story of the Famine is simple. But why the potato’s fatal fascination for the Irish? It was, so it is alleged, always a risky proposition: a fickle plant, its bulk and perishability compounded its dangers. Still the Irish poor – and through them the farmers and landlords who employed them – came to depend on it more and more over time, and even substituted high-yielding but unreliable for allegedly safer varieties. Hence the claim that the crisis of 1845–9 had its roots deep in Irish history. A second major theme concerns the efficacy of action taken. Here opinion ranges from that caught in fiery nationalist John Mitchel’s accusation that ‘the Almighty sent the potato blight, but the English created the Famine’ (in Miller, 1985, 306) to William Wilde’s claim that ‘the most strenuous efforts which human sagacity, ingenuity and foresight could at the time

³ By F. S. L. Lyons (1964–5) 14, 76–9.

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devise were put into requisition'.⁴ While no academic historian takes seriously any more the claim of 'genocide', the issue of blame remains controversial. Many historians shy away from it, though recent scholarship (mainly the work of non-Irish historians) has been facing the issue again. A full appraisal calls for an analysis of the pre-famine economy, so first a brief review of recent work in the area is provided. This is followed by an account of the Famine itself and, finally, an assessment of the impact of the crisis on Irish economy and society.

⁴ *The Census of Ireland for the Year 1851, Part 5, Tables of Death*, vol. I, *Containing the Report, Tables of pestilences, and Analysis of the Tables of Death* (2087-I) H.C. 1856. xxix. 261.

1

Population and potatoes: the pre-Famine context

In most accounts of pre-Famine economic history the key feature is population. Cross-country comparisons of growth rates show why. Taking the period covered in Kenneth Connell's classic *The Population of Ireland 1750–1845* (Connell, 1950) as a unit, among European countries only Finland, Hungary and England seem to have rivalled Ireland's population growth (Table 1.1). Accurate pre-censal estimates of Irish population are impossible, but Connell himself probably underestimated that growth, and recent estimates based on a reworking of the standard sources suggest that numbers trebled in the pre-famine century (Daultrey, Dickson and Ó Gráda, 1981). Such headlong population growth helps explain stories of a country, lemming-like, on the road to disaster.

(i) Demographic trends

By the 1820s and 1830s the effects of the extra numbers were there for all to see. Again and again, travellers noted them in the endemic begging and in the ramshackle cabins and ragged clothes of an underemployed peasantry. Off the beaten track, the margin of cultivation reached bogs and dizzy slopes never cultivated before or since. International comparisons of land/labour ratios might be expected to highlight Ireland's plight. In practice they are less telling, because of differences in the quality of land. Still, in Ireland in 1845 the population density of arable land was about 700 per square mile, and the agricultural population per tilled acre was probably the highest in Europe. To unsentimental observers such as English economist Nassau Senior, the appropriate analogy was a

Table 1.1 *Some comparative population growth rates, 1700–1845 (percentages per annum)*

1700–1845		1750–1845	
France	0.4	France	0.4
England	0.8	England	1.0
Ireland	0.8	Ireland	1.3
		Scotland	0.8
		Sweden	0.7
		Finland	1.0
		Denmark (1769–1845)	0.7

Sources: (Mokyr and Ó Gráda, 1984) and B. R. Mitchell (1975), *European Historical Statistics* (London), pp. 19–25.

‘rabbit warren’. Yet the verdict of modern research is that Irish population growth was slackening long before the Famine. Recent revisions of tax-based and censal data imply that population growth in Ireland fell from 1.6 per cent in 1780–1821 to 0.9 per cent in the 1820s, and had dropped as low as 0.6 per cent in 1830–45 (Daultrey, Dickson and Ó Gráda, 1981; Lee, 1981). That last figure is modest by European standards of the day.

National averages mask considerable regional variation. In most areas badly hit by the Famine, population growth was still very rapid in the 1820s and 1830s. Yet even there growth was slowing down. In the five counties (out of a total of thirty-two) growing fastest in 1791–1821, the rate fell from 2.1 per cent then to 1.4 per cent in 1821–41. That such adjustment took place even in the poorest and remotest counties is an important, often neglected point. Instantaneous adjustment is not to be expected: on the contrary, some ‘overshooting’ due to previous growth and momentum was inevitable. Meanwhile in the midlands and in south- and mid-Ulster population growth on the eve of the Famine was very modest indeed. On these numbers at least, the story that before the Famine Ireland was not facing up to its demographic problems is a myth.

Ireland’s odd, sometimes grotesque, population history has long been the stuff of Irish economic-historical debate (Mokyr and Ó Gráda, 1984). The role of nuptiality and fertility, stressed in Connell’s classic monograph (Connell, 1950), finds little support

elsewhere in contemporary Europe, though it is highlighted by Wrigley and Schofield in their recent account of the English experience. In England the case is based on the sophisticated manipulation of parish register data. In Ireland it must rest instead on largely impressionistic evidence. Admittedly there is a lot of this, a consistent thread through the centuries. In the early seventeenth century it was already being said of Irishwomen that 'their propensity to generation causeth that they cannot endure. They are women at thirteen, and olde wives at thirty'.⁵ The same claim is echoed later by many others (Connell, 1950, 46–59). In the mid-1830s the Irish Poor Inquiry presented plentiful though unsystematic evidence for early marriage. But the firmest pre-Famine quantitative evidence, that provided by the 1841 census, suggests that on the eve of the Famine the average age at marriage (AAM) in Ireland was not exceptionally low (Drake, 1963). Indeed Hajnal's 'singulate mean age' at marriage – roughly the average age at which those who married between the ages of 15 and 50 were married – was over 30 for men born around 1820, and 26 for women.⁶ Malthus would (or should) have been impressed by such 'moral restraint'. Alternatively, inferring the median marriage age from the marriage tables in the 1841 census suggests figures of 27.5 years for men and 23.6 years for women. Since typically the age distribution of marriage is skewed (*) to the right – so that the mean is greater than the median – these two sets of numbers are quite compatible. There was fair regional variation in AAM on the eve of the Famine; by Hajnal's measure women's AAM ranged from 25.0 years in Connacht to 26.8 in Leinster, enough to add an extra child to the average family in Connacht. Cottage industry boosted nuptiality (Almquist, 1979). There were class contrasts too. In the county Cavan parish of Killashandra, before the Famine the mean marriage age of farmers' sons was four years higher than that of labourers (K. O'Neill, 1984, 178).

There can be no doubt about emigration as a factor in depressing the rate of population growth, however. Between Waterloo and the Famine over 1.5 million people left Ireland for good, and the

⁵ C. L. Faulkner (1904) *Illustrations of Irish History and Topography* (London), p. 357.

⁶ D. Fitzpatrick (1985) 'Marriage in Post-Famine Ireland', in A. Cosgrove (ed.), *Marriage in Ireland* (Dublin), p. 130.

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annual rate was increasing over time, though prone to large fluctuations. This outflow was truly massive for its day: between 1815 and 1845 Ireland provided one-third of all voluntary trans-Atlantic movement. Though dwarfed by later flows, the pre-Famine exodus seems to have accounted for as much as one-sixth or one-seventh of all voluntary trans-Atlantic migration between the time of Columbus and the first steamships.⁷ Across Irish regions, pre-Famine emigration was uneven; age-cohort depletion (*) indicates that it was proportionately greatest from north Leinster and south and west Ulster, and lowest from the poorer counties of the south and west (Fitzpatrick, 1984). Did a 'poverty trap' (*) reduce the emigration rate? That many of those cottiers and labourers who lacked the money to buy food during the Famine also lacked the funds to emigrate before 1845 would seem a safe bet. The full cost of a labourer's passage to North America – not just the fare but his subsistence for a few months – was equivalent to perhaps one year's wages. Moving large cottier families was usually out of the question, because credit was rarely forthcoming, and aid was rare. State- and landlord-assisted emigration accounted for no more than a tiny fraction, three or four per cent, of those who left between Waterloo and the Famine (Fitzpatrick, 1984, 14–21). Colonization schemes were difficult to organize, but even a free passage for another ten or fifteen thousand a year after 1815 would have reduced pressure on the land.

When quizzed by officialdom, the poor professed an eagerness to go, if subsidized. Still, migration to Britain was not costly, and the earnings gap between Britain and Ireland on the eve of the Famine was significant. Why did not more go? Hardly out of ignorance, for thousands from the remote west made the journey there as harvest migrants each year, while thousands more migrated within Ireland. Before 1845, though, this seasonal movement tended to replace a more permanent emigration. Like the potato and cottage industry, it accommodated population pressure on the land. Indeed the apparent rise in the seasonal outflow in the 1820s and 1830s may be linked to the decline of textile production in the west. Thus before the Famine the low rate of permanent

⁷ Compare the numbers given in C. McAvedy and R. Jones (1978) *Atlas of World Population History* (Harmondsworth), pp. 30–1.

emigration from the poorer areas had both a cultural and financial basis.

Given its regional mix and the relative wealth and youth of those who left, did emigration deprive the country of a disproportionate share of its human capital? The adverse economic consequences of a 'drain' of brains and skills have been documented (Mokyr, 1980b), but together they do not erase the benefit of emigration to those who really counted, the poor who stayed behind. Emigration reduced land pressure, and in its absence average incomes would have fallen further. Yet migration fits uncomfortably in the positive-versus-preventive check schema suggested by Thomas Malthus in 1798. On the one hand, by reducing numbers emigration averted deaths, on the other, it did so least where it was needed most, and it may also have allowed the maintenance of a high birth rate. Emigration's role may thus seem somewhat contradictory. If it increased inter-regional income disparities within Ireland before 1845, it also reduced the gap between Ireland and outside. This safety-valve aspect grew with time as the outflow became more proletarian.

Combining quantitative and qualitative evidence suggests that both the early growth of population and the pre-Famine adjustment were also linked to AAM. There are some statistical straws in the wind before 1845; local evidence points to some rise in AAM in Dublin and in Cavan in the 1820s and 1830s, but no change in Antrim, while an aggregate exercise based on censal data indicates a drop in the birth rate between 1821 and 1841 (K. O'Neill, 1984; Boyle and Ó Gráda, 1986, 64). Certainly the AAM implied by the 1841 census is high enough to have allowed an earlier rise in AAM some role in the adjustment. Moreover, it is hard to discount all the evidence, admittedly qualitative, in favour of a low Irish AAM in the eighteenth century and earlier; the crux is the timing of the increase in the marriage age. The marriage tables in the 1841 census show evidence of only a feeble rise in the 1830s, suggesting that most of the adjustment in AAM had occurred earlier. The proportions who never married probably rose too before the Famine. Here the comparison between Thomas Newenham's reference in 1805 to the 'extraordinary frequency of marriage among the people of Ireland, which has so often been remarked by

strangers',⁸ and the high proportion of never-marrieds indicated by the 1841 census – one-eighth of women aged 45–54 years – is tantalizing.

Did mortality contribute to population trends? There is a strong Malthusian presumption for a rise in the death rate, at least after 1800, but evidence is elusive. To complicate matters, the number of famine deaths (see below) was probably falling, and the incidence of one major killer disease, smallpox, was declining too. Indeed Razzell^{8a} has claimed for smallpox inoculation the main credit for raising Irish population growth after 1770 or so. Neither smallpox's power to destroy before then nor the chronology of the diffusion of inoculation thereafter are known. True, the available data for Dublin city are impressive enough: smallpox accounted for one-fifth of all reported deaths there in 1661–1745, but for only one in thirty in the 1830s. Dublin's experience was not repeated around the country, though. Just before the Famine smallpox was responsible for only 7 per cent of deaths of Dublin children aged 5 years and under, compared with 11 per cent nationally and 16 per cent in Limerick City. Thus though inoculation reduced mortality, its role was not central. Indeed there was a *positive* association across counties on the eve of the Famine between the risk of dying from smallpox and population growth. In sum, the evidence for a reduction in life expectancy before the Great Famine – if such there was – is not yet to hand.

The outcome suggests that something like the eclectic model of population growth proposed by Ronald Lee for eighteenth-century England⁹ also fits Ireland to 1815 or so. Its starting point is straight from Malthus. The birth rate is taken to be an increasing, and the death rate a decreasing function of the prevailing real wage level; population growth, in other words, rises with wages. The demand for labour (and hence population) is governed by the Law of Diminishing Returns. There is an equilibrium wage that generates

⁸ *A Statistical and Historical Inquiry into the Magnitude and Progress of the Population of Ireland* (London, 1805), p. 18.

^{8a} P. E. Razzell (1970) 'Population growth and economic change in eighteenth and early nineteenth century England and Ireland', in E. L. Jones and G. E. Mingay (eds), *Land, Labour and Population in the Industrial Revolution* (London), pp. 260–81.

⁹ E.g. R. D. Lee (1980) 'A Historical Perspective on Economic Aspects of the Population Explosion: The Case of Preindustrial England', in R. A. Easterlin (ed.), *Population and Economic Change in Developing Countries* (Chicago).