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R. D. Collison Black

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ECONOMIC THOUGHT AND
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1817-1870

BY

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CAMBRIDGE
AT THE UNIVERSITY PRESS
1960

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UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

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www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107475281

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First published 1960

First paperback edition 2014

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-107-47528-1 Paperback

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FOREWORD

BY PROFESSOR VINER

It seems apparent to me that a wide variety of scholars will find matter of interest and value to them in Dr Black's study of *Economic Thought And The Irish Question, 1817-1870*, among them those concerned with the history of doctrine with respect to the economic role of the State, with the political and economic history of Ireland, and with the theories of 'colonialism', 'economic imperialism', and 'economic development'. To the economic theorist, however, its major importance lies in its investigation of the interaction of theory and of policy, of the economist and the statesman in a problem-case of unusually sharp and well-defined pattern, where the economist had beyond any doubt real influence, but was not master, and, moreover, was not strongly enough convinced that his standard economic doctrines suited the special circumstances, to be himself an unqualified advocate of their application to Ireland.

The 'Irish problem' had many facets, but for the economist it was primarily the problem of Irish poverty. England, of course, also at the time had a poverty problem of its own. But there was no doubt that the distress of the masses of the Irish population was without close English parallel in degree or in proportion of the total population involved. In England, moreover, there was visible, or was believed to be visible, a strong tendency towards improvement. This was less apparent for the lowest-income class than for those higher in the social scale. But the middle classes, the improvement in whose economic status was apparent to all, were, unlike the case in Ireland, growing absolutely and relatively in number and were enlarging their ranks to an appreciable extent from below as well as by their own natural increase in numbers. The future of the English working classes did not appear grim enough nor were the English poor, on the whole, discontented, despairing, and threatening enough, to disturb seriously the two-centuries-old complacency of the English ruling classes with respect to the problem of domestic poverty. A corresponding degree of complacency about the problem of the Irish poor it was, however, impossible to maintain.

The period dealt with by Dr Black was, for England, characterised by a greater degree of dominance of *laissez-faire* as doctrine and as practice than in any other period in England's history. In England, however, *laissez-faire* was tempered, as far as the poor were concerned, by the Poor Law and by private charity. Ireland had at first no Poor Law, and too small a proportion of middle- and upper-class population for its charity to make much of an impression, even had it been extraordinarily generous, on the great mass of distress below. Another difference between English

FOREWORD

and Irish poverty, moreover, was in the fact that the proportion of the population dependent on agriculture was much greater in Ireland than in England, and that Irish landlordism was to a large extent a rack-rent, absentee, and alien landlordism, without anything like the same degree of concern for agricultural improvement or of paternalistic interest in the well-being of its tenants, sub-tenants, and labourers as was displayed by the land-owning aristocracy of England.

It was not true in England, as it was in Ireland, that for the ordinary man labouring on the soil there was no prospect of betterment from working harder, or more skilfully, or with the aid of better tools, and that the only escape at all available to him from his plight was through migration to join the lowest ranks of the English working class, or through emigration to even stranger and more distant lands overseas.

No one who was at all confident at the time that he saw a remedy for Irish poverty could find the remedy within the limits of strict adherence to *laissez-faire*. As Dr Black shows, the major remedies proposed were the extension of the English Poor Law, or some variety of it, to Ireland, reform of the Irish system of land-tenure, and public investment, especially in railroads. All of these faced formidable obstacles, of doctrinal opposition, of resistance by vested interests, and of inability to attain strong conviction that the proposed remedies would prove effective.

Since England had had a system of public poor relief financed by taxation since Elizabethan times, and showed no signs of planning to abandon it, the remedy having the least mental and doctrinal hazards associated with it would seem to be extension of the Poor Law to Ireland. But to be effective and productive of revenue in Ireland, where there was no large number of prosperous tenant-farmers or of rateable merchants, it would have presumably been necessary to impose the poor-rates directly on the Irish landlords, rather than, as in England, as a charge based on the annual value of lands and tenements and levied on the occupier. Given the larger proportion of poor in Ireland, the direct tax burden on the Irish landlords would probably have had to be several times greater on the average than the corresponding indirect burden on English landlords. The Irish landlord had enough ties of friendship among the influential in England and enough direct political influence to delay any such action until 1838. I think there is evidence also in the contemporary English literature of fear that, given the extreme poverty of the Irish masses, and given the wide impression in the upper-class English circles that they were feckless and shiftless and lazy, almost any level of poor relief available as a right would be high enough to seem a more attractive means of sustenance for many of the Irish poor than working the land of a rack-rent landlord.

The English were aware that, aside from legal differences, the relations of landlord and tenant were radically different in England and Ireland.

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Frontmatter

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FOREWORD

But English landlords could not contemplate radical tampering by legislation with Irish landed institutions without foreboding that there would thus be undermined also the foundations of their own sacred rights of property.

Investment of national public funds in productive enterprise had never been common in England. Except for the Post Office and the Mint, such investment was in the middle years of the nineteenth century left to local government or to private enterprise or, as in the case of education, permitted to go by default. For an English Parliament to make appropriations for such expenditure in Ireland would, time of famine excepted, have been a greater breach of precedent than was tolerable.

In addition to all this, there was the widespread belief that the fundamental cause of Irish poverty was excess population in Ireland, that the remedies proposed would still further foster growth of population rather than restrain it, and that without restriction of population there could be no real and lasting cure of Irish poverty. If, as I gather, the problem of extreme poverty has been largely solved in Ireland, political independence and land reform have, no doubt, made large contributions. But an unplanned reduction of population, without parallel anywhere else in the western world, or perhaps in the world at large, and attained by a combination of famine, of wholesale emigration, and of the practice of Malthusian 'moral restraint' to a degree far exceeding Malthus' most optimistic expectations, seems to have been largely responsible. Aware as I am of how grievously astray modern experts, equipped with a full set of newly invented forecasting techniques, have gone in predicting modern population trends, I find it difficult to criticise the statesmen and economists of the mid-nineteenth century for failing to foresee what Providence had in store for Ireland. It would be a nice problem to set before modern experts on economic development, with the advantage of all the information made available to them in this book and elsewhere, to design a model reform programme for the Ireland of the 1840's and 1850's which the statesmen of the time could conceivably have adopted, and which would have worked successfully for the Ireland of the next century.

It is the amalgam of solid dogmas, powerful vested interests resistant to change, and statesmen and economists nevertheless persuaded that some action was necessary, which makes the story Dr Black relates so fascinating to read and so puzzling to appraise. Dr Black believes that there was too rigid adherence to dogmas and too abject yielding to vested interests for Ireland's, and I presume, also for England's, good. I have no doubt that he is right. I am struck by the fact that the nineteenth-century history of Ireland seems to offer a striking illustration of the possibility that a greater prevalence of uncalculating compassion and sympathy with suffering may at times be a better instrument of reform than the most carefully reasoned weighing of prudential pros and cons in

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

FOREWORD

deciding whether immediately-helpful expedients would in the long run do more good than harm.

It is interesting, nevertheless, to observe how all along the line, for the economists, as for the statesmen, dogmas *were* modified and vested interests *were* resisted or even made concessions on their own initiative. Even Joseph Hume voted in the affirmative on a Bill providing for the construction of railways in Ireland out of public funds. Even Richard Cobden conceded that 'It is difficult to deal with *Irish* questions on *English* grounds'.

In the case of John Stuart Mill, of course, his adherence to *laissez-faire* was always a conditional one, and he was by temperament and on principle always ready to consider afresh any economic or social principle wherever he recognised that the circumstances there prevailing were in any important respects substantially different from those of the England of his time, which provided the milieu for his general system of social thought. He demonstrated this readiness in practical and concrete ways where India was concerned, as well as where Ireland was concerned. But even Bentham would, in principle, adapt his rules of policy to the circumstances of time and place. As for the rule of governmental non-intervention, he would adhere to it only where the capacities and resources and motivation of the people were such that they could be relied upon, or could be induced, to do for themselves and by themselves all that needed urgently to be done. 'In Russia, under Peter the Great, the list of *sponte acta* being a blank, that of *agenda* was proportionally abundant.' It is even conceivable that Jeremy would not have protested overmuch if one of his many editors had changed the 'Russia' in this passage to Ireland, and the 'Peter the Great' to Parliament in London.

In any case, this study has few rivals in the light it throws on how the standard English doctrines as to the economic role of Government fared when they were tested by a concrete and major issue which urgently demanded consideration. It is only as such studies are multiplied that we will attain an adequate understanding of the actual role of ideas and doctrines in the political and economic history of nineteenth-century England.

JACOB VINER

PRINCETON UNIVERSITY

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R. D. Collison Black

Frontmatter

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TO
MY MOTHER

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978-1-107-47528-1- Economic thought and the Irish Question 1817-1870

R. D. Collison Black

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

CONTENTS

PREFACE	<i>page</i> xiii
I INTRODUCTION	I
1 Purpose of the Study, <i>p.</i> 1	
2 The Irish Economy, 1817-1870, <i>p.</i> 3	
3 Theory and Policy: Methods of Study, <i>p.</i> 12	
II THE LAND SYSTEM	15
1 Thought and Policy on the Land Question, 1817-1845, <i>p.</i> 15	
2 Thought and Policy on the Land Question, 1845-1852, <i>p.</i> 28	
3 Thought and Policy on the Land Question, 1852-1866, <i>p.</i> 44	
4 Thought and Policy on the Land Question, 1866-1870, <i>p.</i> 51	
III THE ABSENTEE LANDLORD	72
1 Nature of the Problem, <i>p.</i> 72	
2 Absenteeism and Economic Theory, <i>p.</i> 73	
3 Absenteeism as a Social Problem, <i>p.</i> 82	
4 Summing-up of the Debate, <i>p.</i> 84	
IV THE POOR LAW	86
1 The Classical Economists' View of the Question of Irish Economic Development, <i>p.</i> 86	
2 Discussion of an Irish Poor Law: The Economists' Contribution, <i>p.</i> 89	
3 Discussion of an Irish Poor Law: The Politicians' Contribution, <i>p.</i> 99	
4 The Course of Policy—to 1845, <i>p.</i> 105	
5 The Course of Policy—1845-1849, <i>p.</i> 112	
6 Thought and Policy on Irish Poor Laws, 1850-1870, <i>p.</i> 131	
V PRIVATE ENTERPRISE AND FREE TRADE	134
1 The Development of Investment in Ireland—English and Irish Opinions, <i>p.</i> 134	
2 Government Policy towards the promotion of Private Investment in Ireland, <i>p.</i> 144	
3 The Actual Development of Private Investment over the period, <i>p.</i> 155	
VI PUBLIC WORKS	159
1 Contemporary Theories of Public Works and their application to Ireland, <i>p.</i> 159	
2 The System of Administration of Public Works in Ireland and its growth over the period, <i>p.</i> 168	
3 Special Schemes of Public Works: (i) Drainage and Land Reclamation, <i>p.</i> 178	
4 Special Schemes of Public Works: (ii) Railways, <i>p.</i> 189	
5 Survey of Public Works Policy, <i>p.</i> 201	

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-47528-1- Economic thought and the Irish Question 1817-1870

R. D. Collison Black

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

CONTENTS

VII	EMIGRATION	<i>page</i> 203
1	Thought and Policy on Irish Emigration, 1817–1830, <i>p.</i> 203	
2	Thought and Policy on Irish Emigration, 1830–1846, <i>p.</i> 215	
3	Thought and Policy on Irish Emigration, 1846–1850, <i>p.</i> 226	
4	Thought and Policy on Irish Emigration, 1850–1870, <i>p.</i> 235	
VIII	CONCLUSION	239
1	The Economists and Ireland, <i>p.</i> 239	
2	The Policy pursued, and its relation to Economic Theory, <i>p.</i> 243	
3	The Facts and the Possibilities, <i>p.</i> 245	
	BIBLIOGRAPHY	249
	INDEX	293

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R. D. Collison Black

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

PREFACE

This book is intended as a case-study of the relations between economic theory and economic policy, which have more often been the subject of broad generalisations than of detailed examination. Any such study must be more microscopic than macroscopic in form, but the absence of reliable secondary sources to which the reader can be referred for many aspects of Irish history in the nineteenth century has often compelled me to include a fuller account of the circumstances surrounding the making of economic policy than might be thought necessary in other cases.

Partly because of the large volume of material which had to be examined in its preparation, and partly because it has often had to take second place to other work, this book has been over eight years in the making. In that time I have accumulated more than the usual amount of indebtedness to friends and colleagues for help and advice, which I can only inadequately acknowledge here. The greatest debt should be put first, and that I certainly owe to Professor Jacob Viner. The groundwork for this book was laid while I was working under his supervision at Princeton University: I profited immensely by the example of his meticulous scholarship, and from the stimulating experience of personal discussions with him, which never failed to provide me with new insights into classical economic thought and new ideas on my subject. At a later stage Professor Viner read the entire manuscript of the book and suggested many corrections and improvements.

I also had the benefit of discussions with Professors F. W. Fetter and W. L. Burn, both of whom read and commented on parts of the manuscript, as did Professor K. S. Isles, Dr Will E. Mason, Dr E. R. R. Green and Dr A. W. Coats. I am grateful to the staffs of many libraries for much help, but especially to Professor Arthur H. Cole, of the Kress Library of Business and Economics at Harvard University, and Mr T. P. O'Neill, of the National Library of Ireland. I need hardly add that I am alone responsible for those errors and imperfections which still remain.

Much of the material for this book was collected while I was in the United States during the academic year 1950–1, and I am indebted to the Trustees of the Rockefeller Foundation for the award of a Social Science Fellowship, and to the Senate of the Queen's University of Belfast for the grant of a year's leave of absence, which made that visit possible. I am also indebted to the Senate of Queen's University for grants from the Research Fund to enable me to examine manuscript materials in London and elsewhere, and for a further generous grant towards the cost of publication of this book.

For permission to make use of manuscript material in their custody, my

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R. D. Collison Black

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

PREFACE

thanks are due to the Marquess of Anglesey, the Earl of Clarendon, and the Keeper of Western Manuscripts at the Bodleian Library, Oxford; the Keeper of Manuscripts at the British Museum; the Deputy Keepers of the Public Records at London, Belfast and Dublin; the Librarian of University College, London; the Director and Trustees of the National Library of Ireland; the Curator of Manuscripts, Princeton University, the Head of Special Collections, Columbia University, the Head of the Manuscript Division and Archives, Baker Library, Harvard University, and the Library Committee of Yale University. Extracts from unpublished Crown Copyright material in the Public Record Office are reproduced by permission of the Controller of Her Majesty's Stationery Office.

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8 January 1960