

# Classical Economic Theory and Policy during the Great Irish Famine\*

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## Abstract

This paper aims to clarify the relationship between classical political economy and the Irish policy of the Whig government, including the former's influence on the latter, during the Great Irish Famine. The paper focuses on the political economy of Nassau William Senior (1790–1864) and John Stuart Mill (1806–1873). Classical political economy of the time is often accused of utterly failing to prevent mass starvation in Ireland.

The paper argues that, in order to assess this assertion during the Great Famine, it is crucial not to oversimplify as one unified group of Whigs the statesmen and mandarins in the Whig government who planned and managed the relief measures, and the classical political economists who offered broad-scale ideas and advised on policy. Mandarins were not always able to grasp precisely and practice effectively what political economists prescribed, nor did they necessarily intend to do so.

The paper concludes that, concerning the Irish relief measures, the influence of classical political economy has been overestimated.

**Keywords:** Classical Political Economy, Great Irish Famine, The Russell Government, Nassau William Senior, John Stuart Mill

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\* This paper is part of research funded by a Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research by the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (JSPS), part of the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), and is based on my presentations, 'Nassau Senior, the Whig Government, and the Great Irish Famine', given at the Conference of the European Society for the History of Economic Thought (Roma Tre University, Italy, May 2015), 'Adam Smith, John Stuart Mill and the Great Irish Famine', given at the Conference of the History of Economics Society (Duke University, June 2016), 'Classical Economic Theory and Policy during the Great Irish Famine', given at the International Conference on Economic Theory and Policy (Liberty Tower, Meiji University, September 2016), and 'John Stuart Mill on the Irish question during the Great Famine', given at the International Conference on Economic Theory and Policy (Liberty Tower, Meiji University, September 2017).

Ireland ‘died of political economy’. — John Mitchel in 1861 (Mitchel, 2005/1861, p. 139)

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## 1. Introduction

For Irish nationalists such as John Mitchel (1815–1875), famine deaths and emigrations were consequences of British malevolence (Miller, 1985, p. 306). Mitchel accused that ‘the Almighty, indeed, sent the potato blight, but the English created the Famine’ (Mitchel, 2005/1861, p. 219). While the vast majority of historians of the Great Famine no longer take seriously the claim of a genocidal plot on the part of the British, the issue of Irish policy of the time remains controversial. Even a historical dictionary states that

The Great Famine occurred at the peak of the free trade movement in England, a time when the English upper classes were convinced that government intervention in economic problems was contrary to natural law. Since they viewed the Irish famine as an economic problem, England did little to relieve the suffering. While a million Irish peasants starved to death, the governing classes of England talked self-righteously about trade laws, the weaknesses of the poor, and the self-destructiveness of the Irish (Olson, 1991, p. 320).

How did classical political economy—if, in fact, it did—corrupt the Irish relief measures of the Whig administration at the time of the Great Famine with its *laissez-faire* policy? Was Mitchel right to say the above? This paper aims to clarify the relationship between the Whigs’ Irish policy and classical political economy, especially the political economy of Nassau William Senior (1790–1864) and John Stuart Mill (1806–1873), which is often accused of utterly failing to prevent mass starvation in Ireland.

## 2. The idea of *laissez-faire* policy as perceived and practiced by Russell’s Whig administration

John Russell’s Whig government (1846–1852) was certainly committed to *laissez-faire* economic policies based on classical political economy and avoided government interference with the market (Black, 1960, pp. 112–131, especially p. 117). It had supported Robert Peel’s Tory policy of the repeal of the Corn Law just before entering office in 1846. No wonder Russell made it clear that his new Whig government, too, would follow *laissez-faire* economic policies. As for Irish relief measures, Russell seems to have been even more fully committed to the idea of *laissez-faire* policy than his predecessor Peel, as he put it bluntly in correspondence with the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland:

It must be thoroughly understood that we cannot feed the people. It were a cruel delusion to pretend to do so. We can at best keep down prices where there is no regular market or established dealers from rising much beyond the fair price with ordinary profits (From Lord John Russell to Lord Bessborough, 11 October 1846, in Gooch, 1925, vol. 1, p. 151).

Russell’s policy was one of wait and see even when his administration faced urgent pleas for public works and controls on the grain trade, perhaps because they had berated the Tories for overreacting in 1845–1846 when they were in opposition (Ó Gráda, 1989, p. 41).

The idea of *laissez-faire* policy was dominant at the height of classical political economy and shared by those in the Whig administration responsible for Irish famine relief. Charles Trevelyan (1807–1886), permanent undersecretary at the Treasury, for instance, is still condemned by some for

imposing dogmatic laissez-faire economic policies on Ireland and aggravating mass starvation. Cecil Woodham-Smith (1962) typically criticized Trevelyan, Prime Minister Russell, and his Chancellor of the Exchequer Charles Wood for pursuing laissez-faire economic policies, which, Woodham-Smith argued, may have worked well in the English and Scottish contexts in putting an end to many monopolistic privileges and promoting economic growth, but were dangerous in Ireland in the 1840s during the height of the Great Famine (Woodham-Smith, 1962, p. 87). Russell himself replied to Daniel O'Connell's warning of impending disaster in the summer of 1846:

We have been informed from various parts of England and Scotland that there is the greatest difficulty in getting in the harvest from the absence of Irish labourers who, when they come over to those districts, usually earn good and even high wages at this season. The inference has been that they found employment in their own country (From Lord John Russell to Daniel O'Connell, 14 August 1846, in O'Connell, 1980, p. 84).

Trevelyan suggested to officials on sick leave to read Adam Smith in order to improve their professional knowledge. On one occasion he is said to have sent to Dublin extracts from Smith's *Wealth of Nations* (1776) and from Edmund Burke's *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity* (1800), and asked that all the staff be given copies (Hart, 1960, p. 96).

The enduring and widespread criticism has been that the fundamental problem in the Great Irish Famine was not the availability of food, but grain being shipped out of Ireland to pay rents as the people starved. If food had been scarce, it has been claimed, why did the government not halt grain exports and balance supply and demand at a lower price? Consequently, it has been argued that Russell's government relied on the self-correcting market mechanism and free trade policy to match supply and demand, pinning its hopes on a quick supply response from overseas, and that it exploited the authority of Adam Smith's dictum that 'the free exercise [of trade] is not only the best palliative of the inconveniences of a dearth, but the best preventative of that calamity' (Smith, 1976/1776, IV. v. b. 21, p. 532). Burke's text may have endorsed the government's rejection of interference even more decisively than Smith's:

To provide for us in our necessities is not in the power of Government. It would be a vain presumption in statesmen to think they can do it. The people maintain them, and not they the people (Burke, 1800, p. 2).

When any commodity is carried to market, it is not the necessity of the vender, but the necessity of the purchaser that raises the price. ... But if authority comes in and forces the buyer to a price, who is this in the case (say) of a farmer, who buys the labour of ten or twelve labouring men, and three or four handicrafts, what is it, but to make an arbitrary division of his property among them? (Burke, 1800, p. 13)

The moment that Government appears at market, all the principles of market will be subverted. I don't know whether the farmer will suffer by it, as long as there is a tolerable market of competition; but I am sure that, in the first place, the trading government will speedily become a bankrupt, and the consumer in the end will suffer. If Government makes all its [*sic*] purchases at once, it will instantly raise the market upon itself (Burke, 1800, p. 29).

Burke's *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity* presented detailed and concrete discussions based on

Burke's own experiences as a landlord and member of parliament, citing examples of a farmer. This no doubt would have made it quite comprehensible and persuasive to Whig landowning statesmen in similar situations as Burke, including Russell's foreign secretary and later prime minister Viscount Palmerston (Henry John Temple, 1784–1865).

Palmerston, too, was reluctant to allow government interference in Irish land matters and, like other cabinet ministers, was strongly influenced by classical political economy (Gray, 1999, p. 52). Palmerston was a country gentleman and improving landowner who had over 10,000 acres in Sligo, and carried out a massive program for improving his own extensive estates throughout his lifetime (Bourne, 1982, pp. 257–258). Since the 1830s, his agent had been engaged in extensive reorganizations, consolidating and squaring the lands formerly held by middlemen, insisting on payment of rent arrears, and ejecting the defaulters (Gray, 1999, pp. 53–54). Palmerston blatantly stated his opinions of clearances on his own County Sligo property:

Ejectments ought to be made without cruelty in the manner of making them; but it is useless to disguise the truth that any great improvement in the social system of Ireland must be founded upon an extensive change in the present state of agrarian occupation, and that this change necessarily implies a long continued and systematic ejectment of Small Holders and of Squatting Cottiers ('Memorandum by Lord Palmerston', 31 March 1848, in Gooch, 1925, vol. 1, pp. 224–225).

In his article 'The Irish Crisis', published in the *Edinburgh Review* in 1848, Charles Trevelyan similarly emphasized that it was the landowning classes who could effectively manage relief because they had partly funded it:

There is only one way in which the relief of the destitute ever has been, or ever will be, conducted consistently with the general welfare, and that is by *making it a local charge*. Those who know how to discriminate between the different claims for relief, then become actuated by a powerful motive to use that knowledge aright. They are spending *their own money* (Trevelyan, 1880, pp. 136–137; *italics* in the original).

Leading Whig statesmen, mandarins, and intellectuals around the Russell government insisted on the evils of public charity and were strongly supported in this by the *Edinburgh Review* and the fledgling *Economist* (Ó Gráda, 1989, p. 52). The founder and first editor of the *Economist* from 1843 to 1859, James Wilson, was a member of parliament, financial secretary to the Treasury, vice president of the Board of Trade, and paymaster general (*The Economist*, 1943, p. 18). Even during the Great Famine, Wilson argued that 'it is no one man's business to provide for another', and insisted that the indiscriminate provision of relief was still further diverting the Irish from that steady industry and increased self-help which alone, in the end, could save them (*The Economist*, 1943, pp. 39–40). In general, speaking of Ireland, Wilson would 'have had the government confine itself to the functions of a government [keeping order] and left the people to perform the function of a people [production]' (*The Economist*, 1943, p. 40). It is undeniable that the Whig government and its supporters were under the influence of classical laissez-faire policy.

### **3. Nassau Senior's ideas of Irish policy**

The Whig idea of laissez-faire policies was publicized incessantly in the *Edinburgh Review* and the *Economist* by able controversialists such as Henry Brougham (1778–1868), one of the founders of the

*Edinburgh Review* and Lord Chancellor (1830–1834), and the classical political economist Nassau William Senior (Ó Gráda, 1988, p. 112). Senior was one of the leading classical economic theorists of his day, appointed the first Drummond Professor of Political Economy at the University of Oxford, and an advisor to the government on economic and social policies in the 1830s and 1840s (Gray, 1998, p. 130). He was responsible for the *Economist's* news and views on foreign affairs under its founding editor James Wilson and, for a time, its second editor Walter Bagehot (*The Economist*, 1943, p. 20).

Senior's article 'Ireland in 1843', published in the *Edinburgh Review* in January 1844 on the Irish question, was all but a Whig Party manifesto, proofread by leading Whig intellectuals and statesmen such as Thomas Macaulay, Russell, Francis Jeffrey, Sydney Smith, and Bagehot (Senior, 1868a; Levi, 1943, pp. 266–278). The *Edinburgh Review* was often seen as the house magazine of the Whig Party, and Senior's articles on Ireland that appeared in the *Edinburgh Review* in the 1840s presented explicit policy prescriptions as well as economic analysis and were taken extremely seriously (Gray, 1998, p. 130).

As Peter Gray (1998) points out, however, it is important to understand that Senior was far from being an obsessive advocate of laissez-faire policies for Ireland, and that Senior represented the strand of economic policies in Whig-liberalism prepared to spurn orthodox opinion and antagonize its leading proponents (Gray, 1998, pp. 133–134). Certainly, Senior's 'Ireland in 1843' was of political value as a reformist Whig manifesto that was to be effectively used to destabilize Peel's ministry by the Irish question (Gray, 1998, p. 134). But Russell and his circle in the mainstream of the Whig Party did not necessarily commit to the premises from which Senior drew his version of justice to Ireland (Gray, 1998, p. 136). For Senior, the causes of the Irish problem were the absence of the economic structural elements of civilization central to classical theory, and by that Senior meant an adequate supply of capital and a tripartite division of labor among landlords, farmers, and laborers (Senior, 1868a, p. 22).<sup>1</sup> Peasant societies like Ireland lacked farmers as members of the middle class and hence were less likely to facilitate high labor productivity and a rapid accumulation of wealth. Senior's argument was that the achievement of social harmony under such a system required considerable capital investment (Senior, 1868a, pp. 29–30).

On the other hand, the Undersecretary to the Treasury Trevelyan, the Chancellor of the Exchequer Charles Wood, and the Colonial Secretary Henry Grey all differed most sharply from Senior in adhering to a classical labor theory of value and in denying that capital in Ireland was inadequate. Ireland, in their policy prescriptions, required not so much imported capital as the Irish will and determination to create wealth from abundant latent resources (Gray, 1998, p. 138).

In Peter Gray's words, Senior was one of the centrist 'moderate liberals' among the Whigs: while the mainstream Whigs held the moral failings of the Irish people rather than environmental factors responsible for Irish distress, and shared an agenda which used providentialist ideas to lend divine sanction to their policy prescriptions, moderate liberals like Senior held views antithetical to such moralist dogmatics, and in general regarded the Irish situation in a coolly secular light. It was from this objective and scientific point of view that the moderates resisted any further moves by the Whig government towards an extension of the Poor Laws. It is true that Senior's 'Proposals for Extending the Irish Poor Law', published in the *Edinburgh Review* in October 1846, was directed ostensibly against the political economist and Member of Parliament George Poulett Scrope's radical proposals for extending the Irish Poor Laws, but it was also implicitly critical of the mainstream Whigs and their moralist agenda (Senior, 1868b; Gray, 1998, p. 138).<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Like Senior, O'Donnell also discusses that the root cause of the Irish problem was the lack of adequate capital (O'Donnell, 2013, p. 133).

<sup>2</sup> As for Senior's criticism of Scrope, see Senior, 1868b, pp. 138–142 and 171–175; Black, 1960, p. 121.

Scrope's writings on political economy were most frequently concerned with rural poverty, national financial disturbance, and the Great Irish Famine (Sturges, 1984, p. 12),<sup>3</sup> but his economic arguments were not orthodox, and the limited contemporary impact of much that he wrote cannot be denied (Sturges, 1984, p. 13). In an age when support for the gold standard was almost a touchstone of political responsibility, Scrope was a bold advocate of paper currency (Scrope, 1830; Sturges, 1984, p. 20). Scrope's chief theoretical departure from orthodoxy was his rejection of the dominant Malthusian view of population (Sturges, 1984, pp. 21–22). Scrope's anti-Malthusian sentiments and willingness to contemplate government expenditure as a remedy for poverty were far from standard free-trade liberal orthodoxy (Sturges, 1984, pp. 24–25). In arguing for the extension of the Irish Poor Laws, Scrope clearly opposed the idea of applying English-style *laissez-faire* economic policies to Ireland: 'The *laissez-faire* maxim, applied to her [Ireland] would leave her to perish by the rapid destruction of all property, or to be overwhelmed in the ruins of some convulsive explosion!' (Scrope, 1847, p. 11; see also Scrope, 1837, p. 16) Scrope's distrust of the political economy of Malthus, Whately, Senior, McCulloch, and other more orthodox figures placed him in sympathy with some Tory views (Sturges, 1984, p. 25). The theme, so constant in Scrope's economic writing, that current political economy stressed the increase of wealth while the true aim of the economists was to promote welfare (Sturges, 1984, p. 26), is at the core of his voice that cried out for policies for Ireland that placed the welfare of the Irish people before the interests of the landowners (Sturges, 1984, p. 28). Scrope argued that a just law of tenure was necessary for Ireland to ensure that exertion could improve the condition of the peasant and that every improvement was for the benefit of the cultivator himself (Scrope, 1847, pp. 8–9), and he urged that this should be accompanied by government efforts to stimulate, facilitate, and aid the employment of the able-bodied poor (Scrope, 1847, p. 9).

Moderates like Senior were centrists of the Whigs because they defended the record of Irish landlords against the assaults of both Whig radicals like Scrope and Whig mainstream moralists: both groups assumed an unlimited Irish wages-fund while Senior denied it and insisted that Irish landlords should not be compelled to bear the burdens of relief unaided (Senior, 1868b, pp. 142–143). Faced with the imminence of social collapse in Ireland, Senior insisted that the increase of landlord powers concerning the extraction of rent from their tenants was vital in Ireland if its excessive population was not to rise further out of control (Senior, 1868b, pp. 143–148). Previous British misgovernment and the inappropriate extension of English constitutional liberties to Ireland had brought about the present crisis (Senior, 1868b, pp. 156–170). Evictions and the greater coercive powers of landlords were vital if equilibrium was to be restored (Senior, 1868b, pp. 175–176; Gray, 1998, p. 139).

By the time Senior published 'Relief of Irish Distress in 1847 and 1848' in the *Edinburgh Review* in January 1849, he had come to regard that all Irish distress was now solely attributable to the mismanagement of the Poor Laws. Senior was by now convinced that the Great Famine had left Ireland over-populated by two million people. The only fundamental resolution required diminishing Irish overpopulation by whatever means. As few could afford voluntary emigration, and the government offered no aid for that matter, mass starvation was inevitable (Senior, 1868c, pp. 241–245). On this question, however, the decisions were made by the mainstream Whigs such as Wood and Trevelyan, who, in Senior's view, identified the moral failings of Irish landowners as the root cause of Ireland's problems and were strongly backed by a populist English middle-class tide which demanded policy prescriptions directed at that target (Gray, 1998, p. 142).

Senior's 'Relief of Irish Distress in 1847 and 1848' was no longer a Whig manifesto: it now articulated regret from the moderate liberals who had failed to determine the course of government

<sup>3</sup> Scrope published 81 books and pamphlets during his lifetime, and as many as 56 when he was a member of parliament between 1833 and 1867 (Sturges, 1984, pp. 37–75).

policymaking during the Great Irish Famine (Gray, 1998, p. 141). Public works may have provided the framework, but they failed to provide the funds for preventing starvation. As Senior argued, mass emigration, properly subsidized and regulated by government, would have reduced mortality, but the Whig government's relief measures relied on unaided self-help, and Russell dismissed a widely-supported scheme of assisted emigration to Canada proposed in the spring of 1847 (Ó Gráda, 1989, p. 55).

Senior had not been an advocate of doctrinaire laissez-faire policies in Ireland. Senior's criticism of the management and extension of the Poor Laws and his argument for amending them and strengthening property rights in Ireland, however, have been interpreted to indicate that he now abandoned his previous interventionist leanings and embraced a ruthless laissez-faire line. But those arguments were Senior's response to what he regarded as the demoralizing and socially destructive forms of government intervention adopted by Russell's Whig ministry. It passed a series of measures against the opposition of the moderate liberals: first the Temporary Relief, or Soup Kitchen, Act of February 1847, followed by the Poor Law Extension Act of June 1847, which embodied many of the clauses against which Senior had written (Senior, 1868c, pp. 213–214). Senior, for instance, wrote that

we may be sure that, if we allow the cancer of pauperism to complete the destruction of Ireland, and then to throw fresh venom into the already predisposed body of England, the ruin of all that makes England worth living in is a question only of time (Senior, 1868c, p. 264).

But it would be a gross misreading to take this as his eagerness to sacrifice hundreds of thousands of Irish men and women for the greater good of survivors (see, for instance, Ó Gráda, 1988, p. 113). Rather, this was rhetoric expressing opposition from the moderate Whigs to Irish relief measures pursued by the mainstream Whigs in power, and, as Peter Gray (1998) articulates, relief policymaking during the Great Famine shows not the dominance of Senior, the moderate liberals, and classical political economy of whatever traits, but their marginalization (Gray, 1998, p. 140).

#### **4. John Stuart Mill's ideas of Irish policy**

Along with Senior, John Stuart Mill was another classical political economist closely involved in the Irish question during the Great Famine. While writing his *Principles of Political Economy with Some of Their Applications to Social Philosophy* (1848), Mill published forty-three articles titled 'The Condition of Ireland' in the *Morning Chronicle* from 5 October 1846 to 7 January 1847, presenting his own ideas of Irish policy (Ikeda, 1990, p. 61; Ikeda, 1999, p. 140; Levin, 1998, p. 90; Kawana, 2010, p. 132). His purpose was to present his own version of the land policy of Ireland (Ikeda, 1992, p. 88). And 'In these [articles] he [Mill] turned blame away from the supposed faults of the peasants themselves and towards British parliaments that had enjoyed the benefit of centuries of rule in Ireland' (Levin, 1998, pp. 90–91). In his *Principles*, too, Mill repeatedly argued about Irish land issues in detail (Ikeda, 1990, pp. 61–62).

The target of Mill's land policy in Ireland was the 'cottier' (Ikeda, 1992, p. 88). In his *Principles*, Mill defined cottiers as follows: 'By the general appellation of cottier tenure I shall designate all cases without exception in which the labourer makes his contract for land without the intervention of a capitalist farmer, and in which the conditions of the contract, especially the amount of rent, are determined not by custom but by competition' (Mill, 1965/1848, vol. 2, II. ix. 1, p. 313). Cottiers therefore were to be distinguished from Scottish cotters, who paid customary rents in kind that were well below the competitive rate, in order to live in a cottage and cultivate small plots of land. Scottish

cotters also had, in effect, multiple employment opportunities (Smith, 1976/1776, I. x. b. 49, p. 133). If by extra exertion the Irish cottier doubled the produce of his bit of land and prudently abstained from giving birth to children to eat it up, his only gain would be to have more left to pay to his landlord (Mill, 1965/1848, vol. 2, II. ix. 3, p. 318). Mill wrote that ‘[t]he grand economical evil of Ireland is the cottier-tenant system. We were on the point of calling it the grand moral evil also. Neither the economical nor the moral evils admit of any considerable alleviation while that bane system continues’.<sup>4</sup> Mill criticized the situation in which ‘[t]he majority of a population of eight millions, having long grovelled in helpless inertness and abject poverty under the cottier system, reduced by its operation to mere food of the cheapest description, and to an incapacity of either doing or willing anything for the improvement of their lot, had at last, by the failure of that lowest quality of food, been plunged into a state in which the alternative seemed to be either death, or to be permanently supported by other people, or a radical change in the economical arrangements under which it had hitherto been their misfortune to live’ (Mill, 1965/1848, vol. 2, II. x. 1, p. 324). According to Mill,

Almost alone amongst mankind the cottier is in this condition, that he can scarcely be either better or worse off by any act of his own. If he were industrious or prudent, nobody but his landlord would gain; if he is lazy or intemperate, it is at his landlord’s expense. A situation more devoid of motives to either labour or self-command, imagination itself cannot conceive (Mill, 1965/1848, vol. 2, II. ix. 3, pp. 318–319).

The Great Irish Famine attacked the cottiers trapped in such miserable conditions: ‘The misery for millions of potato-dependent people and for others was compounded by a number of factors that even singly would have been overwhelming: government attitudes to the provision of relief; ... evictions from land and from mean one-room hovels by heartless landlords; the sight of cart-loads of grain and other crops being taken along the roads to ports for shipment to England and other markets while they starved’ (Fry and Fry, 1988, p. 231).

Mill’s own recommendations involved ending the cottier system by which the peasants were held bound and hopeless. The pernicious effects of this system derived from a situation in which competition for land was exacerbated by overpopulation (in terms of available work) and the lack of sufficient employment opportunities outside of agriculture. Consequently, rather than be without land and hence without work and pay, tenant farmers were drawn by competition into paying rents that they could not afford. At best they achieved solvency at subsistence level. At worst they became indebted and so more deeply bound to the landowner. Under these conditions, any improvement in the situation of landless workers was hardly possible. Any change was more likely to be downwards from poverty into destitution (Levin, 1998, pp. 92–93).

Unlike Senior, Mill was against the overseas emigration of the Irish cottiers as a remedy.<sup>5</sup> And Mill was opposed to ‘[i]mprovement in the English sense, improvement by the more powerful instruments and processes of capitalist-farmers’ because ‘[t]he introduction of English farming is another word for the clearing system. It must begin by ejecting the peasantry of a tract of country from the land they occupy, and handing it over *en bloc* to a capitalist-farmer’.<sup>6</sup> Along with William Thomas Thornton (1813–1880), Mill’s friend and colleague at the India Office, Mill urged the government to purchase and ‘have the waste lands reclaimed and parcelled out in small properties among the best of the

<sup>4</sup> Mill, ‘The Condition of Ireland [3]’, *Morning Chronicle*, 10 October 1846, in Mill, 1986, vol. 24, p. 889.

<sup>5</sup> Letter 521, from John Stuart Mill to Aubrey de Vere, 3 February 1848, in Mill, 1963, vol. 13, p. 730; see also Kawana, 2010, pp. 134, 136, and note 63, p. 136.

<sup>6</sup> Mill, ‘The Condition of Ireland [4]’, *Morning Chronicle*, 13 October 1846, in Mill, 1986, vol. 24, p. 894.

peasantry'.<sup>7</sup> Mill therefore proposed to remedy the endemic structural faults of the cottier system by establishing peasant proprietorship.<sup>8</sup> In 1846, Thornton had published *Over-Population and its Remedy, or, An Inquiry into the Extent and Causes of the Distress prevailing among the Labouring Classes of the British Islands, and into the Means of Remedying it*, and argued that more than six million acres of Irish land were lying waste and that well over half of it was suitable for agricultural purposes (Thornton, 1999/1846, vol. 2, p. 431). There was, then, clearly sufficient and adequate land available to give to the peasants. Mill proposed compulsory purchase of such land, redistributing it to peasant families and granting adequate compensation to the former owners. Emigration was an unnecessary and expensive travail when the solution to the Irish problem lay within Ireland itself (Levin, 1998, p. 93).

The idea which Mill advanced in the *Morning Chronicle* and his *Principles* was strikingly at variance with what the Russell Government might have perceived as orthodox classical ideas on the subject. Mill characterized the introduction of capitalist farming into Ireland generally as wholly impracticable. Mill firmly asserted that Ireland could only be improved by converting the cottiers into peasant proprietors, but neither Mill nor Thornton advocated the immediate introduction of a general system of occupying ownership, for both of them saw that legislation on such lines was not a practical possibility for Ireland in 1848. In consequence, they proposed a gradual introduction of peasant proprietorship, involving the compulsory acquisition or purchase of waste lands from their owners, and the settlement of cottiers thereon. The cottiers, with the aid of some advance of materials and implements, were to reclaim the waste, and, upon doing so, to become the owners of it, subject to a small fixed-rent charge to recoup the outlay made by the state. The transfer of the cottiers to the waste lands, it was hoped, would reduce the pressure of demand for land and raise the level of wages in the rest of Ireland, so that the introduction of English capital and farming over the remaining surface of Ireland would at once cease to be chimerical. This Thornton-Mill scheme differed considerably from later schemes of land purchase. It was in fact a project for 'home colonisation', with a proprietor status for the colonists, leaving the landlord-tenant relationship unaltered in the rest of Ireland, but freed from the aberrations which had brought it into disrepute (Thornton, 1848, pp. 217–254, as well as Thornton, 1999/1874, vol. 3, pp. 220–252; Black, 1960, p. 31). What was important was to show the cottiers the possibility of becoming landowning peasants (Ikeda, 1990, p. 75; Ikeda, 1992, pp. 89 and 94; Ikeda, 1999, p. 141).

The landowning peasant was Mill's ideal of agricultural laborers. Mill regarded it as preferable to convert the cottiers into peasant proprietors rather than into wage laborers under capitalist farmers: 'In the régime of peasant properties, ... the whole produce belongs to a single owner, and the distinction of rent, profits, and wages, does not exist'. In the régime of peasant properties, the laboring peasants 'are the most uncontrolled arbiters of their own lot' (Mill, 1965/1848, vol. 2, II. vi. 1, p. 252).

It was desirable for the cottiers to be able to have the hope of becoming owner-occupiers and such possibilities would prove equally effective for the whole Irish economy. Mill's arguments on this line of thinking appear throughout his articles in *Morning Chronicle* as well as in his *Principles*. The morally wrong rule by the English, however, had impoverished Ireland. It was with this assessment in mind that Mill proposed his Irish policies (Ikeda, 1999, p. 142).

The state of Ireland—not the present state merely, but the habitual state—is hitherto the most unqualified instance of signal failure which the practical genius of the English people has exhibited. We have had the Irish all to ourselves, for five hundred years. ... They have been as completely delivered into our hands as children into those of their parents and instructors. ... An independent

<sup>7</sup> Letter 494, from John Stuart Mill to Alexander Bain, 28 December 1846, in Mill, 1963, vol. 13, p. 705; Black, 1960, p. 30.

<sup>8</sup> Kawana, 2010, pp. 133–134, 136–137, and note 67, p. 137.

nation is, in all essentials, what it has made itself by its own efforts; but a nation conquered and held in subjection ever since it had a history, is what its conquerors have made it, or have caused it to become.<sup>9</sup>

Mill was equally critical of the Irish policies of the British government during the Great Famine.

There have been three stages in the arrangements of Government for supplying food and employment to the destitute Irish people. In the first stage all the employment was on public works. The extent of the calamity was not then known. ... while wages were to be got for breaking stones and cutting down hills, ploughing and sowing were forgotten, and ... a year hence, if there were no change of measures, Ireland would have roads, but no bread.<sup>10</sup>

The public works provided by the British government were inappropriate as their priority was on infrastructures rather than on supplying provisions.

Mill was even more critical of the Irish Poor Law. Government interventions such as the Poor Laws should be approved ‘always provided that the assistance is not such as to dispense with self-help, by substituting itself for the person’s own labour, skill, and prudence, but is limited to affording him a better hope of attaining success by those legitimate means’, and they were ‘to give the greatest amount of needful help, with the smallest encouragement to undue reliance on it’ (Mill, 1965/1848, vol. 3, V. xi. 13, p. 961). The Irish Poor Law during the Great Famine—‘[t]hat which has pauperised nearly the whole agricultural population of England’ was now, however ‘the expedient recommended for raising to comfort and independence the peasantry of Ireland’.<sup>11</sup> It was ‘the one thing that the Legislature could do by which the economical evils of Ireland would be made worse than they already are’.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, ‘the whole English people are ... taking their revenge on the Irish gentry by the infliction of a lavish poor law which if it passes will as it seems to me render the evils of Ireland incurable except by an universal seizure of the land and expulsion of the proprietors’.<sup>13</sup>

Mill’s policy proposal of converting the cottiers into peasant proprietors had the intention of curing the evils of the Irish cottier system on humanitarian grounds after the policy failures of the British government during the Great Famine. Being peasant proprietors would enable farmers to live diligently and temperately, with self-command for the sake of their own future: ‘The tendency of peasant proprietors, and of those who hope to become proprietors, is ... to take even too much thought for the morrow. They are oftener accused of penuriousness than of prodigality. They deny themselves reasonable indulgencies, and live wretchedly in order to economise’ (Mill, 1965/1848, vol. 2, II. vii. 3, p. 282). Thus, Mill’s proposal of peasant proprietorship was for the moral improvement of the uncivilized Irish (Kawana, 2010, pp. 139–140). To give the Irish cottiers land ownership as small occupiers might possibly solve the problem of overpopulation by awakening their moral sense of continence and avoiding emigration. Mill described the Irish and his solution as follows:

A people who in industry and providence have everything to learn—who are confessedly among the most backward of European populations in the industrial virtues—require for their regeneration the most powerful incitements by which those virtues can be stimulated: and there is no stimulus as yet comparable to property in land. A permanent interest in the soil to those who till it, is almost a guarantee for the most unwearied laboriousness: against over-population, though not infallible, it is the

<sup>9</sup> Mill, ‘The Condition of Ireland [1]’, *Morning Chronicle*, 5 October 1846, in Mill, 1986, vol. 24, p. 880.

<sup>10</sup> Mill, ‘The Condition of Ireland [41]’, *Morning Chronicle*, 4 January 1847, in Mill, 1986, vol. 24, p. 1027.

<sup>11</sup> Mill, ‘The Condition of Ireland [1]’, *Morning Chronicle*, 5 October 1846, in Mill, 1986, vol. 24, p. 881.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 881–882.

<sup>13</sup> Letter 499, from John Stuart Mill to Henry S. Chapman, 9 March 1847, in Mill, 1963, vol. 13, p. 709.

best preservative yet known (Mill, 1965/1848, vol. 2, II. x. 1, pp. 326–327).

Mill repeated the necessity of creating peasant proprietorship in Ireland based on land tenure in perpetuity in his parliamentary address on 17 May 1866:

Continental experience ... tells us that where his agricultural economy, in which the actual cultivator holds the land directly from the proprietor, has been found consistent with the good cultivation of the land or with the comfort and prosperity of the cultivators, the rent has not been determined, as it is in Ireland, merely by contract, but the occupier has had the protection of some sort of fixed usage. ... Such a social and agricultural system as exists in Ireland has never, or next to never, succeeded without tenant-right and fixity of tenure. If Ireland is ever to prosper with peasant farming, fixity of tenure is an indispensable condition.<sup>14</sup>

Mill went on to say:

Instead of bringing in capitalist farmers over the heads of the tenants, you have got to take the best of the present tenants, and elevate them into the comfortable farmers you want to have. ... Give them what you can of the encouraging influences of ownership. Give them an interest in improvement. Enable them to be secure of enjoying the fruits of their own labour and outlay. Let their improvements be for their own benefit, and not solely for those whose land they till.<sup>15</sup>

Mill argued that if the British government were to give land tenure in perpetuity at a fixed rent and convert the peasant farmers into peasant proprietors, Ireland ‘can receive [the benefit of peasant proprietorship] from the Government of the United Kingdom, if those who compose that government can be made to perceive that it is necessary and right. This duty once admitted and acted on, the difficulties of centuries in governing Ireland would disappear’.<sup>16</sup>

In terms of Mill’s developing economic theory, there are two cardinal points: one is that landed private property is not sacred. No one created it and if the current owners do not use it for the public benefit, then they may be compelled to do so. The state can in some circumstances have a duty to curtail property rights (Levin, 1998, p. 95).<sup>17</sup> Second, the type of state action that Mill accepts is facilitative, to provide conditions in which people are enabled to look after themselves. State charity is rejected as self-defeating, for it provides no motivation to do without it. What should be encouraged is the mentality of self-improvement and emulation (Levin, 1998, p. 95).

Mill had his own long-term perspective in elevating the cottiers into peasant proprietors, raising their incomes, and peacefully bringing capitalist farming into Ireland with the policy of creating small-scale land ownership (Ikeda, 1990, p. 78; Ikeda, 1992, p. 90). An opposing policy to this peasant proprietorship for Mill was the creation of large-scale land ownership which would accompany a rapid integration of lands with the clearance of the cottiers. Mill tried to stanch such a policy and solve the land issue of Ireland from a long-term perspective (Ikeda, 1990, p. 76; Ikeda, 1992, p. 94).

Perhaps as a concession to the views of Mill and Scrope, Russell in fact brought forward a bill to enable the state to undertake the reclamation of certain waste lands in Ireland. This waste lands bill, however, notably failed to pass. In the House of Commons, Peel opposed it on the grounds that private

<sup>14</sup> Mill, ‘Chichester Fortescue’s Land Bill’, 17 May 1866, in Mill, 1988, vol. 28, p. 77.

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*, p. 78.

<sup>16</sup> Mill, ‘England and Ireland’ (1868), in Mill, 1982, vol. 6, p. 526.

<sup>17</sup> Thornton, on the other hand, did not entirely agree with Mill’s utilitarian view of restricting landownership (Thornton, 1999, vol. 1, p. 101).

enterprise, when freed by the sale of encumbered estates, would undertake all the reclamation of waste that was desirable. Other members pointed to the ruin which subdivision had brought on Ireland in the past as an argument against the creation of smallholdings on reclaimed land. In the face of this opposition, the government subsequently dropped the bill (Black, 1960, pp. 35–36).

While Mill advocated small farms and peasant proprietorship in the *Morning Chronicle*, Nassau Senior attacked the schemes of Mill and Thornton in the *Edinburgh Review* with all the weapons of orthodox doctrine. Senior was ready to admit the merits of occupying ownership and small farms, but not that they could be realized in Ireland. Senior argued that the cost of resettling pauper families on waste lands would be considerably greater than that of assisting them to emigrate, and that there could be no adequate safeguard against renewed subdivision of the small farms and excessive growth of population (Senior, 1868c, p. 257; Black, 1960, pp. 31–32).

It is undeniable, however, that the failure of the bill for the reclamation of waste lands in the end made it easier for Ireland to proceed to a clearance of the cottiers, as the Corn Laws were abolished and the Great Famine worsened, and then to the historical transition from cereal cropping to cattle breeding. As a result, Ireland became a province that supplied wool and beef to mainland Britain. More than a million cottiers cleared of lands were then forced to emigrate due to the lack of demand for labor within Ireland (Ikeda, 1990, p. 77; Ikeda, 1992, p. 93). Mill opposed Senior's promotion of the emigration of the cottiers and proposed an alternative policy of land reform in Ireland in order to solve the problem of overpopulation. In the policymaking process of the Whig administration, however, Mill was as marginalized as Senior was.

## **5. Irish relief measures by the Whig administration and classical political economy**

The Irish policy during the Great Famine that resulted in over a million deaths would have to be assessed in the end as a failure. Any analysis and interpretation of its reasons, however, is deemed to be more difficult than meets the eye. This section focuses on the relationship between the failures of the Whig policies and classical political economy.

During the Great Irish Famine, the relief measures were influenced by the doctrinaire laissez-faire economic policies of the Whig government, and were consequently laid down and managed on the principles of local financing and 'less eligibility'.<sup>18</sup> Between 1845 and 1853 the British government spent about £7 million on famine relief, but Ireland financed nearly £9 million locally through poor rates and landlord borrowings (Donnelly, 1989c, pp. 328–329). The £7 million from the government was originally granted only as a loan, which hindered its effectiveness as famine relief because the Board of Works, concerned with the continuity of their operations, routinely turned down applications for help from the neediest areas (Ó Gráda, 1988, p. 116).<sup>19</sup> From 1841 to 1850, the British GNP was about £460 million annually (Floud and McCloskey, 1981, p. 136), and the government was ready to spend nearly £70 million a few years later on the Crimean War between October 1853 and February 1856 (Ó Gráda, 1988, p. 117), but compared with this, government spending on Irish relief measures was clearly not enough.

In late 1846, the leader of the Tory protectionist opposition, George Bentinck (1802–1848), reminded Parliament that a country which had spent £100 million annually for three years fighting Napoleon should not be downhearted about providing properly for Ireland (Ó Gráda, 1988, p. 117).

<sup>18</sup> James S. Donnelly, Jr., has clearly recounted the Irish relief measures during the Great Famine: see Donnelly, 1989a, 1989b, 1989c, and 1989d.

<sup>19</sup> On the operation of the Board of Works, see Griffiths, 1970.

While the Whigs of the time pursued laissez-faire economic policies, the Tories were ‘liberal’, and Bentinck was a vocal supporter of more spending in Ireland, in particular on railways (Ó Gráda, 1989, p. 51). When Daniel O’Connell around the same time asked the government to give Ireland £30 million to £40 million for securing food, he pointed to the £20 million that had been given to West Indian slave owners a few years earlier to compensate them for emancipation. In this sense, it is not wrong to conclude that the Irish policies actually pursued could not prevent mass starvation because the belief in laissez-faire made them strictly subject to tight budgetary constraint and accordingly the ungenerous aid was hardly geared to local need, as the economic historian Cormac Ó Gráda has argued and Richard Grossman has also recently pointed out (Ó Gráda, 1988, p. 114; Grossman, 2013, pp. 66–67).

Nevertheless, three points should be made clear below. The first point is how to assess laissez-faire policies concerning grain exports from Ireland during the Great Famine. Thomas O’Neill (1956) once criticized them and argued that

it was anomalous that any food should have been exported while the people starved. A prohibition of export was probably essential in the autumn of 1846 to bridge the period until food could be imported from America. Neither party [the Whigs or the Tories] could, however, cut off Irish supplies from England after repealing the corn laws to provide cheaper food. The fetish of free trade had tied their hands (O’Neill, 1956, p. 257).

Grossman (2013), too, argues that it seems ‘perverse’ that Russell refused to impose restrictions on the export of grain from Ireland and that Irish grain was being exported in the midst of famine (Grossman, 2013, pp. 61 and 64).

This unsettling paradox of produce being exported from a country afflicted with famine was also condemned at the time of the events. On 12 June 1847, the Irish paper the *Nation* reported the disquieting allegation that consignments of Irish food were sent to Le Harve, Bordeaux, and Antwerp, and criticized the fact that while Irish businessmen sold for their own profits, the incidence of starvation in their native country grew steadily (*The Nation*, vol. 5, no. 245, pp. 564–566 and 572).

How far the shortage of food during the Great Famine should be attributed to the laissez-faire economic policies in grain trade, however, is not a straightforward question. Ó Gráda (1999) argues that, as a practical matter, the issue of grain exports is of more symbolic than real importance: the ensuing increased supply of food would have made only a small dent in the gap left by the potato failure because the exported grain would still have filled only about one-seventh of the gap left by the potatoes in Ireland in 1846 and 1847. There is no denying that the famine was, at least in those years, a classic case of food shortage (Ó Gráda, 1999, p. 124).

Russell’s predecessor Peel was also skeptical of the benefits of policies such as prohibiting grain exports from Ireland (Grossman, 2013, p. 61), and he wrote the following in a private letter: ‘I have no confidence in such remedies as the prohibition of exports, or the stoppage of distilleries [of grain into alcohol]. The removal of impediments to import is the only effectual remedy’.<sup>20</sup> The outcome was the repeal of the Corn Laws in July 1846 (Black, 1960, p. 113; Ó Gráda, 1989, pp. 50–51; Kinealy, 1994, pp. 37–38; Grossman, 2013, p. 62). In the long run, liberating imports made more sense than prohibiting exports during the Great Famine, and by the summer of 1847, Irish markets were flooded with foreign corn and there was a huge drop in net exports in the late 1840s (Ó Gráda, 1989, p. 61). In the end, mass starvation was not due to the failure of the market to work (Ó Gráda, 1989, p. 54). That the British laissez-faire economic policies brought about deaths in the midst of plenty is an enduring, populist image of the Great Famine, but it oversimplifies the situation (Ó Gráda, 1999, p. 124).

<sup>20</sup> From Sir Robert Peel to Sir James Graham, 13 October 1845, in Parker, 1899, vol. 3, p. 223.

Exports allowed Irish farmers to smooth consumption; in an open economy context, they could sell tradable grain without incurring fire-sale losses. They could then use the proceeds to purchase cheaper imported corns at world market prices, rather than at elevated domestic prices that would have prevailed in a closed economy during a famine.

The second point is an interpretation of the Great Irish Famine in terms of the Malthusian population principle. One of the reasons that the Great Irish Famine has gained wider and more lasting notoriety than most famines is its popularity as a case study in Malthusian exegesis (Ó Gráda, 1989, p. 9). The growth of Irish population has been put down to early marriage, and the Great Famine has been seen as ‘the ultimate Malthusian catastrophe’ (MacDonagh, 1970, p. 7). The price paid by the recklessness of the Irish for their high marriage rate and their large families is often noted as a particularly stark instance of the principle of population in action (Ó Gráda, 1989, p. 9). In *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798), the classical political economist Thomas Robert Malthus based his population thesis on the assumption that the growth of the population was faster than that of food production and argued that the unchecked growth of population would inevitably lead to the outbreak of a famine as an ultimate positive check.

Famine seems to be the last, the most dreadful resource of nature. The power of population is so superior to the power in the earth to produce subsistence for man that, unless arrested by the preventive check, premature death must in some shape or other visit the human race. The vices of mankind are active and able ministers of depopulation. They are the precursors in the great army of destruction, and often finish the dreadful work themselves. But should they fail in this war of extermination, sickly seasons, epidemics, pestilence, and plague, advance in terrific array, and sweep off their thousands and ten thousands. Should success be still incomplete, gigantic inevitable famine stalks in the rear and, with one mighty blow, levels the population with the food of the world (Malthus, 1989/1798, vol. 1, pp. 303–304).<sup>21</sup>

Malthus’s powerful argument was so well known that populist and socialist critics saw the Whig laissez-faire policy at the time of the Great Irish Famine as Malthusian murder by the invisible hand (Gibbon, 1975, p. 139).

Modern research, however, has cast a cold cliometric eye on the assumption of orthodox Malthusian exegesis that the pre-famine Irish economy was Malthusian in the sense that living standards on the eve of the Great Famine were reduced or constrained by population pressure, and found it wanting.<sup>22</sup> Irish population growth is seen to have been slackening long before the famine (Ó Gráda, 1989, p. 12). Mokyr states that ‘[i]t is widely agreed now that Irish population growth was slowing down after 1790’ (Mokyr, 2006/1983, p. 31). The rate of population growth in Ireland dropped from 1.7% in 1800–1821 to 0.9% in 1821–1831 and 0.6% in 1831–1841, which was achieved through increased emigration and reduced marriage rate rather than rising mortality (Kelly and Ó Gráda, 2015, pp. 9–10). The Irish economy avoided mass starvation for so long. The Law of Diminishing Returns, a key feature of the Malthusian presumption that food supply could not keep pace with a fast-growing population, was at least held at bay. It has been pointed out that the diffusion of new agricultural techniques developed in Britain, such as wheeled carts, ploughs, new seed varieties, and modern rotations, increased grain yields per acre between the 1770s and the early 1840s (Ó Gráda, 1989, p. 29). In addition, the Poor Inquiry of 1836 and the Census of 1841 suggest that on the eve of the Great

<sup>21</sup> In the 1807 edition, this paragraph was omitted (Malthus, 1989/1798, vol. 1, Book II, Chapter VIII, footnote 40, p. 304).

<sup>22</sup> The most vigorous and revolutionary in scope and method is Mokyr, 2006/1983, pp. 38–60. See also Ó Gráda, 1989, pp. 34–38. The most important arguments proposed by Mokyr are still endorsed by Kelly and Ó Gráda, 2015, p. 10.

Famine the average age at first marriage in Ireland was at least above 25 years, not exceptionally low in comparison with other European countries at the time (Mokyr, 2006/1983, p. 37; Drake, 1963, pp. 301–304). Already in the 1830s, the average age at first marriage in Ireland was on the rise (Drake, 1963, pp. 308–311). Also, Ireland's marriage rate was not exceptionally high before the Great Famine (Mokyr, 2006/1983, p. 36). Ó Gráda commented that Malthus would have been impressed by such moral restraint (Ó Gráda, 1989, p. 14).

Finally, even if the laissez-faire economic policies of the Whig government made it impossible to act effectively in the face of Ireland's grave emergency, whether their commitment to free and unfettered markets owed to their devotion to, or application of, an ideology of classical political economy, as Ó Gráda (1988), Grossman (2013), and Black (1960) have all assumed, is another question (see Black, 1960, p. 130; Ó Gráda, 1988, p. 122; Grossman, 2013, p. 67). O'Donnell (2013) still reiterates persisting and populist views that statesmen like Peel and Russell and classical political economists like Senior concurred on anglicizing Ireland—exploiting the Irish crisis as a highly useful lever—or that Senior and other professional political economists colluded with the Whig government to regulate Ireland's malfunctioning landlord-tenant relationship and then exonerated themselves of their failure by insisting on following the principle of laissez-faire economic policies (O'Donnell, 2013, p. 117).

As shown in the previous sections, however, classical political economists like Senior and Mill were hardly able to exert any influence on Whig policy formation on Ireland during the Great Famine. O'Donnell's assertion that a long-time Hibernophobe Senior used Swiftian malevolence to execrate the agricultural structure of Ireland and advocated a full Irish agricultural revolution by endorsing the preconceived notions of English superiority is wide of the mark (see O'Donnell, 2013, pp. 116–117). Instead, in 'Relief of Irish Distress in 1847 and 1848', Senior criticized the Whig government's attempts to impose the English-style relief measures on Ireland because England and Ireland had different landowning structures (Senior, 1868c, pp. 203–208). There is no malevolence in Senior's descriptions of Ireland: he simply explained the differences between England and Ireland because he thought it improper to extend the English Poor Laws and use them as the basis for the Irish relief measures (Senior, 1868c, pp. 198–203). Senior's attitude was not anti-Ireland but anti-poverty: he was dismissed from the Professorship of Political Economy at King's College London in 1832, after only one year in office, for supporting the Irish Catholic Church.

Mill, too, regretted that his policy proposals presented in the *Morning Chronicle* had not been adopted:

You will have seen by this time how far the ministry are from having adopted any of my conclusions about Ireland, though Lord J. Russell subscribes openly to almost all the premises. I have little hope left. The tendency of their measures seems to me such that it can only bring about good to Ireland by excess of evil.<sup>23</sup>

Later in life, Mill still wrote in his *Autobiography* (1873) that

the profound ignorance of English politicians and the English public concerning all social phenomena not generally met with in England (however common elsewhere) made my endeavours an entire failure. Instead of a great operation on the waste lands, and the conversion of cottiers into proprietors, Parliament passed a Poor Law for maintaining them as paupers: and if the nation has not since found itself in inextricable difficulties from the joint operation of the old evils and the quack remedy, it is indebted for its deliverance to that most unexpected and surprising fact, the depopulation of Ireland,

<sup>23</sup> Letter 497, from John Stuart Mill to Alexander Bain, 27 January 1847, in Mill, 1963, vol. 13, p. 707.

commenced by famine, and continued by emigration (Mill, 1981, vol. 1, p. 243).<sup>24</sup>

As the Whig government adopted the Poor Law that Mill had opposed as a relief measure, the cottiers were consequently forced to emigrate (Ikeda, 1992, p. 93).

## 6. Conclusion

As Peter Gray (1998) has pointed out, assessing the relationship and influence between classical political economy and the Irish policy of the Whig government during the Great Famine requires sorting out the complex web of ideas and motivations underlying relief policy and observing the frequently bitter and personalized disputes within governing circles over how to deal with the Irish crisis (Gray, 1998, p. 131). It is important not to oversimplify the matter by viewing the statesmen and mandarins in the Russell government who planned and managed the relief measures, and the classical political economists who offered ideas and advised on policy, as one unified group of Whigs. In addition to Peter Gray's indication, it is crucial to distinguish between what was a more nuanced, institutionalist or pragmatic approach to the question of Irish poverty by the classical political economists such as Senior and Mill on the one hand, and the doctrinaire laissez-faire caricature of classical political economy that the Russell government embraced on the other.

Concerning the Irish relief measures, the theorization in classical political economy, the refinement of it into a coherent economic policy, and the effective execution of it in the administrative sphere were distinctive processes that were totally different from one another. Jenifer Hart (1960), who analyzed thirty-eight volumes of Trevelyan's semi-official letters containing over 11,000 pages of correspondence during the nineteen years that he was Undersecretary at the Treasury (1840–1859), argued that Trevelyan was an extremely hardworking mandarin (Hart, 1960, p. 94), but

one cannot help thinking that it would have been better if he had left his desk more often and gone to test his theories on the spot, particularly his views on self-help and charity, before they became entrenched dogmas. On Ireland as on many other matters, Trevelyan's analysis and cures were too simple and naive (Hart, 1960, p. 100).

Mandarins like Trevelyan were not always able to grasp precisely and practice effectively what classical political economy prescribed, nor did they necessarily intend to do so.

Senior and Mill argued that the overpopulation of Ireland should be eliminated, and consequently criticized the extension of the Irish Poor Laws and their management by the Whig government. Nevertheless, it could be argued that the implementation of the new Poor Laws in June 1847 shifted an even larger portion of the relief expense to local taxpayers, who could not afford it, and led to an increase in the number of unwanted tenants evicted from their homes (Grossman, 2013, p. 65), thereby helping to produce a long-term solution to the economic difficulties by effecting some emigration of those uneconomic smallholders and insolvent proprietors who were removed. The Great Famine prompted the integration of lands by which landowners could rid themselves of the cottiers and peasants who were then forced to emigrate, especially to North America. This clearance produced some 460,000 emigrants by 1880 (Ikeda, 1992, p. 85). In the short term, however, much of this was achieved in a harsh and erratic fashion in the context of a famine: it was a solution by trial and error, with the misery of homelessness being added to that of starvation and destitution, rather than a practical solution

<sup>24</sup> While agreeing with Mill's proposal, Thornton, on the other hand, thought that the creation of peasant proprietorship was a policy that needed highly skilled administration if applied to Ireland (Thornton, 1999, vol. 1, p. 101).

through the orderly application of a well thought out plan that classical political economists like Senior and Mill had proposed (Black, 1960, p. 131; Kinealy, 1997, pp. 123–124).

Whether the British government could ever have dealt with a misfortune as tragic as the Great Famine, even if it had increased its spending and practiced the policies proposed by classical political economists such as Senior and Mill in a way recommended by them, remains to be analyzed. At least, however, I would like to conclude that the quotation of John Mitchel at the beginning of this paper was, favorably speaking, an overestimation of the influence of political economy, or putting it strongly, an undue accusation of it, and in normal terms, an exaggeration.

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