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‘And this in thriving and prosperous Antrim!’: An Anglo-Irish landlord’s perspective on the Famine

« Et ceci dans le comté florissant et prospère d’Antrim ! » : Point de vue d’un propriétaire terrien anglo-irlandais sur la Famine

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‘And this in thriving and prosperous Antrim!’: An Anglo-Irish landlord’s perspective on the Famine

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The quotation in the title of this paper is taken from a pamphlet by an Anglo-Irish landlord, Alexander Shafto Adair, entitled *The Winter of 1846-7 in Antrim, with Remarks on Out-door Relief and Colonization*, published in London in 1847.¹

Adair’s family connections with Antrim went back to the beginning of the seventeenth century. The Adairs, who owned the Kinhilt estate in the Galloway peninsula (south-west Scotland), acquired land in the area of Ballymena (County Antrim) in 1618,² around the same time that many other English and Scottish settlers were arriving in the escheated counties of Ulster under the terms of the Crown-sponsored Plantation scheme. The family subsequently gave up its land in Scotland and settled permanently in Ireland, before acquiring an estate at Flixton Hall in Suffolk in 1783 which was to become for a long time the principal family seat. Robert Alexander Shafto Adair (1811-1886), the author of the pamphlet, was educated at Harrow and Cambridge. Having made a number of visits to Ballymena from 1840 on, he moved there in 1846 to administer the estate on behalf of his father. He arrived therefore just as the effects of the famine were about to reach catastrophic proportions. A Whig, he was elected to a constituency in Cambridge at the general elections in 1847, the year his pamphlet on the famine in Ireland was published.

¹ Alexander Shafto ADAIR, *The Winter of 1846-7 in Antrim, with Remarks on Out-door Relief and Colonization*, London: James Ridgway, 1847, 70 pp. The text, with a foreword by Brian Logan, was re-edited by Eull Dunlop in 1997 and published by the Mid-Antrim Historical Group (Alexander Shafto ADAIR, *The Winter of 1846-7 in Antrim, with Remarks on Out-door Relief and Colonization*, ed. Eull DUNLOP, Ballymena: Mid-Antrim Historical Group, 1997, 24 pp). In acknowledgement of his extraordinarily valuable work in identifying and salvaging material highlighting key aspects of the local history of the Mid-Antrim area, page references (in brackets) will be to Dunlop’s 1997 edition. I would also like to thank Liz Hoy of the Local Studies Department of Ballymena Library for her generous assistance during the preparation of this article. The quotation used as the title of this article is on page 21 of Dunlop’s re-edition.

² Local historians and commentators differ on the details of the early history of the Adairs. Brian LOGAN, in *Ballymena during the Famine* (Ballymena, 2000, p. 5), says that the estate was acquired ‘about 1618’ from a local Irish lord, Rory Oge McQuillan, while Nicola PIERCE, in *Ballymena: City of the Seven Towers* [2007] (Belfast: Brehon, 2011, p. 18), says the Adairs ‘exchanged Dunskey Castle [near Portpatrick, Scotland] for lands in Ballymena that were owned by Viscount Montgomery of Ardes’ in 1608.

In this pamphlet, which he specifically addresses to Parliament ('to those whose great privilege it is to deliberate, in the legislature, on Ireland', 24), Adair gives his 'personal narrative' (3) of the Irish famine as it effects the tenants on his estate, explaining how the policies put in place by the Government are translated into concrete action on the ground and how the local community is responding to the crisis. Primarily though, he uses the pamphlet as a basis on which to make a series of recommendations as to how the famine might be addressed so as to produce long-term benefit to the economy and the demography not only of Ireland but of the 'nation' as a whole. Writing within what would be seen today as a firmly 'unionist' perspective, the text places the local within the context of the United Kingdom, the British 'nation' being seen as synonymous with the Empire.³ The pamphlet therefore provides us with a multiple framing of the situation, starting with the local, and moving out in successive waves through the regional and the national to the global. In many ways, this framing mirrors the repercussions of the famine itself.

The pamphlet is of interest on a number of levels. Parts of it can be read as one of the numerous first-hand accounts written during the famine, providing insights into the way 'one community' (3) deals with the crisis in Ireland. This is all the more interesting in that his estate is located in and around the town of Ballymena, Co. Antrim, a region with a strong Scottish and Presbyterian influence, considered to be one of the areas least affected by the ravages of the famine.⁴ Much of the relatively

³ 'The combined national existence of Great Britain and Ireland must be perfect and complete. A difference of local habits and customs does not infer a diversity of national, that is, of imperial tendencies' (10).

⁴ The Famine had a less devastating impact in Ulster than in other parts of the country. Several factors were advanced to explain this phenomenon. The greater industrialisation of the region, its cottage industry (linen) and its lower levels of dependence on the potato were put forward as contributory factors. It was also stressed that Ulster had another specificity which was seen at the time as contributing to the relative prosperity of its agricultural population, i.e. the so-called 'Ulster custom' which ensured that the sitting tenant had preference on the renewal of a lease and would receive compensation for any improvements he may have effected during his tenancy (see Martin W. DOWLING, *Tenant Right and Agrarian Society in Ulster 1600-1870*, Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1999). However, there was also an ideological dimension to the way in which the impact of the famine was played down in Ulster. Thus, Gerard MACATASNEY, in his introduction to *'The Dreadful Visitation': The Famine in Lurgan/Portadown* (Belfast: Beyond the Pale Publications, 1997, p. xiv), claims that the 'myth' that 'the Great Famine did not affect Ulster' was underpinned by the conviction (in unionist circles) that 'Ulster held a quasi-racial, cultural and religious superiority over the rest of the country'. Recent scholarship has sought a more objective assessment of the impact of the famine on Ulster. In terms of population loss, William J. SMYTH in 'The province of Ulster and the Great Famine', in John CROWLEY, William J. SMITH and Mike MURPHY (eds), *Atlas of the Great Irish Famine* (Cork, University Press, 2012, pp. 417-425), puts forwards the following figures: 'It is probable that well over one third of a million people left Ulster during the Famine. As many as 150,000 to 170,000 people likely died of famine-related causes. Out of a probable 1845 total of over c.1.9 million, Ulster lost c.480,000 to 500,000 people – or c.19% of its population' (425). Regarding the situation in the area of County Antrim, Kerby A. MILLAR, Brian GURRIN and Liam KENNEDY, in 'The Great Famine and religious demography in mid nineteenth-century Ulster', in CROWLEY, SMITH and MURPHY, *Atlas of the Great Irish Famine* (op. cit., pp. 426-433), refer to the parish of Kilwaughter, adjacent to the area covered by the Ballymena Union, saying: 'between 1841 and 1851 Kilwaughter's population [over three-quarters of whom

confident and self-satisfied tone regarding the efficiency of the strategies Adair implements on his estate has to be seen in light of this fact.

Adair clearly considers that the primary reason this area is more favoured than many others is the traditional strength of the linen industry. Whereas '*the country part of the estate has fortunately one loom at least in almost every house*', the main town, Ballymena, is the '*largest linen market in the north*' (3). He goes on to say that, '*from the proceeds of that source of wealth, developed by persevering industry and from the general trade of the town, the inhabitants form a prosperous and self-reliant community*' (3). The mixed nature of the local economy ensures that '*the families in this district have an unusual security against want*', which he claims gives '*resources unknown, alas, to a large proportion of their famished countrymen*' (3), thus suggesting that the area is indeed a place apart.

However, as we shall see, Adair's position is not always to be taken at face value. Whereas the domestic linen industry had indeed been an indispensable supplement to the small farmers' income, Adair curiously chooses not to mention the downturn that was affecting the linen industry in the north at this period. Christine Kinealy, in her introduction to *The Famine in Ulster*, says: '*The failure of the potato crop in 1846 coincided with a slump in the linen industry which drastically reduced the incomes of many handloom weavers*'.⁵ At a more local level, Brian Logan confirms that the linen trade in the Ballymena area was coming under considerable pressure. Thus, Logan quotes the '*Ballymena correspondent*' of the *Banner of Ulster*⁶ in September 1847, who says: '*In this part of the country, the weaver, although he works 16 hours out of the 24, is never more than half-fed and half-clothed. There is scarcely one who is not drowned in debt*'.⁷ Adair's silence on aspects like this which question his ultimately optimistic reading of the situation is a recurrent feature of his frequently one-sided, selective version of events.

The author is clearly keen to establish his credentials as an authority. As someone with estates in England and Ireland, he has vested interests in and knowledge of both systems, and is therefore capable of looking at the situation well

were Protestants, 96% Presbyterian] declined by a remarkable 36.4%, compared with a 9.0% overall decline in County Antrim (not including Belfast)'. Although some of this loss would have been due to disease and malnutrition, most would have been due to out-emigration to Belfast, England and America as a result of the decline in the domestic textile industry and clearances.

⁵ Christine KINEALY, p. 6 in her introduction to Christine KINEALY and Trevor PARKHILL (eds), *The Famine in Ulster*, Belfast: Ulster Historical Foundation, 1997, pp. 1-14.

⁶ *The Banner of Ulster*, founded in 1842 by Rev. William Gibson, was a twice-weekly newspaper aimed primarily at the Presbyterian population in the North of Ireland. It ended publication in 1869.

⁷ LOGAN, *Ballymena during the Famine*, op. cit., p. 66. William J. SMYTH in 'The province of Ulster and the Great Famine' (op. cit., p. 418), adds information on the religious composition of those affected, referring to: '*the vulnerability of deindustrialising Protestant communities – particularly its Presbyterian component – to devastating famine conditions. The Presbyterian communities in mid-Antrim [where Adair's estate was situated] lost c. one-third of [its] population [...] between 1841 and 1851*'.

beyond the strictly local or regional frame. His position is that ‘*nothing [in Ireland] is to be taken for granted*’ (2). Casting himself in the role of someone who has acquired first-hand experience of Ireland, albeit in traumatic circumstances (‘*the scales were about to fall from my eyes and I awoke, as from a deep slumber, to behold the awful calamity which still devastates Ireland*’, 3), he uses this first-hand experience as an essential aspect of his rhetorical strategy to comment on what he sees as the ill-informed nature of much on-going Government policy and to put forward suggestions as to how to tackle what he considers to be the fundamental problem of his adopted country, *i.e.* the system of land holding in Ireland:

Amongst strangers, or those who have paid but a passing visit to the country, the deficiency is universal. The former attempt to reason on general but inapplicable, analogies; the latter are deceived by first appearances and, lacking time to sound the depths, carry away with them unavoidably most erroneous convictions [...]. For instance, how many travellers confound the small farm system with that of the cottage allotment; how many think that perpetuities are the sure sources of comfort and improvement, whereas the squalid cabin at the demesne gate and the hovel in the main street of a thriving market town are almost certainly crumbling upon perpetuities. (2)

It is therefore important that the ‘*English reader*’ should understand the specificity of the Irish situation which, according to Adair, prevents any direct translation from one system (England) to another (Ireland). Ireland may well be an ‘*integral part of the United Kingdom*’; it nonetheless presents a radically different context to that of England. Apart from the literally unimaginable state of the country (‘*I do not think it possible for an English reader, however powerful his imagination, to conceive the state of Ireland during the past winter, or its present condition*’, 7), Adair is keen to underline fundamental structural differences, especially, as we have already seen, the origin of tenure, the nature of tenancy, and above all, the near insolvency of large sections of the Irish landed class.⁸

Adair is someone who operates at the heart of the British establishment.⁹ Thus the text demonstrates a keen awareness of the on-going legislative debates on the Irish crisis in what to many of his tenants would have been a far-off Parliament in London. The pamphlet is clearly part of his personal career strategy within the Whig party: he had stood unsuccessfully as a Whig candidate at by-elections in 1843 and 1845 and would be elected to a seat in Cambridge in the general election of 1847, the year the pamphlet is published. But, beyond his immediate self-interest, Adair is writing to defend the interests of the Irish landlord class which was coming under increasingly virulent attack in England. As James S. Donnelly, Jr. points out: ‘*What is most remarkable, then, about the discussion of the great famine in Britain in early and mid-1847 is the extremely harsh and almost unanimous verdict given against*

⁸ Adair at one point says quite bluntly: ‘*Ireland [...] is a bankrupt country*’, 11.

⁹ Adair stood as a candidate in both countries on several occasions. He was elected to a seat in Cambridge for the first time at the general elections in 1847, the year of this publication. He was subsequently made a peer in 1873.

Irish landlords,¹⁰ the latter being accused of extravagant living, inefficiency and hard-heartedness in avoiding payments of rates and in evicting tenants. Worst of all, from a British perspective, they were accused of unloading the problem on to the British tax-payer through encouraging emigration to England and Scotland and through the official cost of responding to the crisis in Ireland itself.¹¹ By showing his action in a favourable light and by underlining the difficulties under which the Irish property-owning gentry and aristocracy have to function, Adair aims to provide an alternative position to what had thus become the orthodoxy of the moment. Evidence of this sort was all the more urgent as the British MPs were in the process of making a law designed to make Irish property support the entire burden of Irish poverty, the future Poor Law Amendment Act in June 1847 (see below).

The practicalities on the ground – the landlord as the lynchpin of the system

Adair explains in the text that the immediate reason for his coming to Ballymena in November 1846 was his receiving news that a number of ‘labourers’ in the town had been demanding work. On arriving in Ballymena (*‘a large and prosperous market town’*, 3), he is, as the main landlord in the area, rapidly appointed Chair of the Relief Committee made up of prominent local residents set up to deal with the crisis. The first reflex, consistent with the practice recommended in relation to the relief act that had been voted by the new Liberal Government in August 1846, was to draw up lists of those seeking employment. When the Relief Committee is presented with the ‘roll’ of 230 names (the population of the town was around 6,000), it is discovered that *‘few of the applicants were known to the residents of the town, or to the clergy of the various denominations’* (4). This anomaly leads Adair to discover the existence of what he calls an *‘almost mendicant, but not migratory class so numerous about Ireland, to whom the potato afforded a cheap means of subsistence, who hung upon the skirts of society in town and country, doing little or no work’* (4).

The primary characteristic of this group is their invisibility, an invisibility in which Ireland itself is seen as being complicit: *‘These are the poor wretches whom the country conceals in miserable hovels and the towns hide in cellars’* (12). Adair insists on the fact that many of the poor are

unknown to any beyond their own miserable cluster of huts. Is it known that the tenant farmer has a cottier tenant residing in that low cabin against the farmer’s house-end? And that yon small dwelling, which you think must be a byre, is the den of some helpless being, some sad parasite of poverty? It is from these dwellings that the overpowering famine, like some land-flood, forces the ghastly figures that now

¹⁰ James S. DONNELLY, Jr., *The Great Irish Potato Famine* [2001], Stroud: The History Press, 2010, p. 100.

¹¹ For the evolution of British opinion on Irish landlords during the famine, see Edward C. LENGEL, *The Irish Through British Eyes: Perceptions of Ireland in the Famine Era*, Westport, CT: Praeger, 2002, pp. 101-104.

cluster around the boardrooms of the Union-houses, scarcely human in their aspect, almost brutal in their helplessness. (12)¹²

The discovery of this ‘underclass’ of paupers, ‘whose numbers, whose existence almost, would never have been known but for the famine which drove them into the labour market’ (4), gives rise to a veritable epiphany which will condition much of the argument that Adair proposes in the remainder of the text.

Adair’s initial preoccupation is therefore to identify what he calls this ‘*interstitial population*’ of ‘*cottier tenants*’ who had succeeded in remaining outside the sphere of State and administrative control. This population, descendants of those who at the time of the Plantation had been ‘*partly permitted and partly encouraged to invade the waste and the mountain*’, is not only undocumented, it is above all numerous, and thus clearly an avatar of the ‘*swarms*’ of ‘*Irishry*’ that haunted the collective settler imagination well into the seventeenth century and beyond. As with Malthus, the concern is with the demography of poverty and the threat to the stability of society that that represented (‘*their numbers gave proportional political influence*’, 17).

Although there is nowhere in the text any explicit reference to the link between the ‘*prosperous and self-reliant community*’ of Ballymena and the religion of that community, references scattered throughout the pamphlet suggest that Adair¹³ sees this community¹⁴ as quite distinct from the ‘underclass’ that he is targeting in his text, an underclass that is said to have originated in a community which at the Plantation had refused ‘*to leave the edge of the native bog*’ and which ‘*from the lack of supervision and of self-restraint, multiplied and increased considerably*’ (17). Despite Adair’s coy refusal to discuss religion, it is therefore not difficult to imagine the religious affiliation of those concerned. However, as the pamphlet moves forward, the contours of this group within the broader population are increasingly blurred to include the entire pauper class. In parallel, Adair’s analysis becomes progressively more hostile so that in the end there is an explicit association between poverty and crime: ‘*Let it be supposed that [...] every infirm person, widow and child is restored to the wretched dens and filth from which they emerged, there to brood in uselessness or crime, to the scandal and annoyance of the industrious*’ (15).

¹² Here we have many of the elements of the traditional caricature of the Irish that would become a dominant feature of British propaganda over the course of the century.

¹³ Originally Presbyterian, the Adairs had by the middle of the 19th century moved over towards the established Church.

¹⁴ Adair says: ‘*The ruling elders of the Presbyterian congregations are generally small farmers [...] who walk “as ever in their great Taskmaster’s eye”*’ (22). This should be seen in light of his earlier remark: ‘*A flourishing nation of small proprietors implies a very advanced condition of social arrangements or a simple state of society such as existed in Switzerland during the bright periods of her early history. It is true that, in the north-eastern counties, a state of society is to be met with that recalls forcibly the simplicity of those historic times*’ (22). Interestingly, the famine is seen as a ‘*stroke which would have overtaken the trained industry of the Briton or the Hollander*’, both archetypal ‘Protestant’ nations.

Adair's first priority is the measurement of this pauper class on the basis of 'accurate inspection'. Forcing the poor to register on a roll with a local authority will result in 'the surplus energy of the district [...] be[ing] accurately known and measured' (17). This reflex reflects the logic of the Poor Law (Ireland) Act, 1838, which proved to be the first stage in the setting up of a formidable administrative machinery which brought in its wake an entirely new lexicon of surveillance and control.¹⁵ Through the agency of the Poor Law Guardians, appointed to administer each Union,¹⁶ the Government was henceforth able to extend its vision into the peripheral regions of the most remote townlands.¹⁷ An essential aspect of this improved information gathering is linked in to the proliferation of administrative cartographies. Thus, maps of the existing baronies, electoral districts and townlands are used in various combinations (through juxtaposition or superimposition) as the bases on which new cartographies for Poor Law Unions, vaccination districts, etc., can be compiled in order to channel and filter information with a view to revealing hidden or blurred demographics. This comes in the wake of the first supposedly 'accurate' census in 1841 and is in many ways the extension of the taxonomic impulse behind the Ordnance Surveys.¹⁸

Adair identifies the origin of this population as lying in the vagaries of the land system in operation in Ireland, especially with regard to 'perpetuities' and 'long leases'. He informs his English readers that the history of these leases is to be found in the Plantation settlement: 'These were granted, in the first instance, for a consideration extrinsic from that incident to the modern lease, the money value; namely, for the feudal purpose of defence and mutual assistance' (12). Here he refers to the tenure offered to (Protestant) planters in the context of the Ulster Plantation scheme at the beginning of the 16th century: 'The consideration of the lease was expressed to be the establishment of a Protestant tenantry; and a trifling rent was charged in consideration of the nature of the expected service' (12). In other words, the original preoccupation of the lease was said to have been that the land should be used to reinforce the Protestant presence in the area, the land being let for long periods of time, even in perpetuity, at very low rent in order to attract the initial tenants. He provides a detailed anecdote to illustrate his point. Referring to a case he has encountered in the area, he says:

*After the usual fashion [...] sub-division proceeded at a fearful rate.
When this lease expired [after almost a century], there were 1800*

¹⁵ The Relief Commission, Boards of Guardians, Relief Committees, the Central Board of Health, etc.

¹⁶ The Ballymena Union was created under the terms of the extension of the Poor Law to Ireland in 1838. Ballymena was one of the original 130 Unions created across Ireland. The system centred on the town's Workhouse, with a capacity of 900, completed in November 1843 and administered by a Board of Guardians. The Union was the catchment area for the poor of the locality round Ballymena and was financed by the collection of local rates. The area concerned 'measures five miles by three and in 1841 contained 10,253 inhabitants' (6), divided between town and country dwellers.

¹⁷ We are very close here to what Foucault has to say about the nineteenth-century State's drive to acquire a capacity to survey the population in order to effect tighter social control.

¹⁸ See J.H. ANDREWS, *A Paper Landscape, The Ordnance Survey in Nineteenth-century Ireland* [1975], Dublin: Four Courts, 2002.

souls upon the townland and not a Protestant amongst them [...]. And yet the middleman, I repeat, had his uses in the beginning. It was through his agency that the estates of the early settlers were peopled and cultivated; and, if the middleman class had been true to themselves, Ireland would now possess a yeomanry not inferior to that of England (12).

Here he places the present situation in its historical frame, attacking the role of the middleman in the non-respect of key aspects of the initial leases, leading to the proliferation of excess (what we are to understand from the example given as Catholic) population on the land. He will later use this evidence to support his argument that, for these historical reasons, the Irish landlord finds himself in an impossible financial position, arguing that it is therefore unfair to read his situation according to the radically different standards of England.

The immediate aim of the Relief Committee under his control is to offer these people work, to bring them within the gamut of money relations and move them away from seasonal work, subsistence, beggary and – allegedly – crime. In characteristically paternalist style, Adair optimistically insists that the intransigence of the Committee during what he calls ‘*our experiment*’ over the three-month period (the pamphlet is published in London in March 1847) has enabled them to accustom ‘*our labourers*’ to the new work regime.¹⁹

However, the crisis goes well beyond this immediate problem, apparently so swiftly settled. Once again, the position of the landlord is presented as central to the resolution of the crisis. Adair goes out of his way to cast himself as an enterprising landlord, committed to the well-being of his tenants.²⁰ Having understood the medium-term implications of the potato blight – Adair calculates that there would be no improvement at least until the harvest of 1848 – he decides to invest in an alternative food source. Once again, he uses his initiative and the cultural capital of his position to frame a strategy that goes beyond the locality and the provincial. He decides ‘*that proportionate allowances of seed oats should be made to the tenants*’, but in the face of the high prices and limited supply of seed oats on the local market, in this case, Belfast, he decides to send his agent to Glasgow: ‘*he thought himself most fortunate in having secured oats for seed at 48s per quarter, in the Glasgow markets, on 3rd February. The prices asked at that time in Belfast ranged from 58s to 64s per cwt*’ (5).

¹⁹ The reader is to understand that similar determination will produce similar results elsewhere, a highly doubtful proposition.

²⁰ There is much evidence to suggest that he was by contemporary standards a generous landlord. Christine Kinealy says: ‘[...] the Adair family who held an estate in Ballymena, Co. Antrim, regularly made “munificent donations” to the local relief committee. As a result of these latter contributions, the relief committee was able to avoid seeking assistance from the government’ (Christine KINEALY, *The Great Calamity: The Irish Famine 1845-52* [1994], Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 2006, pp. 164-5). This positive assessment is confirmed by an earlier author, Thomas MACKNIGHT, *Ulster as it is, or Twenty-eight Years Experience as an Irish Editor*, Vol. 1, New York: Macmillan & Co., 1896, p. 105: ‘Sir Shafto and his predecessor and his successor were called good landlords. They were among the best’.

This reflex of going to buy supplies in Glasgow says a lot about the practical realities of life in this part of north-eastern Ireland, intimately linked in to commercial and cultural networks in Scotland, particularly since the Plantation period. The east-west logic of what is in many ways a natural 'province' straddling the North Channel represents another (unspoken) confirmation of the economic and cultural union that he sees as existing naturally within the British archipelago. The initiative here consists in the local landlord using the reach of his experience to act outside the local frame in what he clearly sees as the collective interest. His remark to the effect that the famine was to be seen as a global threat ('*felt from the poor cottier's cabin up to the households of the wealthiest*', 4) indicates not only his organic vision of society but also the danger the famine poses to the stability of the social order.

A further initiative, which, incidentally, he claims to have been the most efficient, involved the setting up of soup kitchens throughout the Ballymena area. Once again, the focus is on the local community as the instigator of relief action. Adair is keen to point out that, as with the organisation of work for unemployed labourers in the town (done '*without receiving any assistance from Government for that purpose*', 3) and the purchase of seed for the benefit of the tenants of the estate at a reduced price, the community preferred direct action at a local level to Government assistance. This was very much in the line of current Government thinking as exemplified in the radical positions taken by Charles Trevelyan.²¹ Government saw its responsibilities as being limited to providing a legislative framework and, in the case of the soup kitchens, to encouraging local charity through the offer of complementary donations.²² But the subtext of Adair's pamphlet is quite clearly designed to underline to the target audience – the '*English reader*' and more particularly the MPs in Westminster – that, contrary to on-going virulent criticism of the Irish landlord class as a whole, Irish property is quite prepared to take its responsibilities.²³ This interest in identifying sources of initiative is an essential element in his overall rhetorical strategy which is designed to prove that the Irish landlord class should not be the object of undue victimisation by the British establishment, but should instead be seen as useful interlocutor in what will necessarily be a multi-faceted solution.

Adair provides details of the quasi-military organisation involved in the distribution of soup:

²¹ For a re-assessment of Trevelyan's role in the administration of the famine, see Robin F. HAINES, *Charles Trevelyan and the Great Irish Famine*, Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2004. For an analysis of how Adair '*split[s] off from the tradition of old political economy*', see Gordon BIGELOW, *Fiction, Famine and the Rise of Economics in Victorian Britain and Ireland*, Cambridge: University Press, 2003, pp. 122-128.

²² '*Subscriptions were raised, an equal amount added by the Lord Lieutenant and the arrangements and funds placed under the management of Relief Committees, legally responsible to the Government*' (6).

²³ Adair does admit that some Irish landlords are not pulling their weight. Thus, he refers to the '*improvident, [...] the incapable and [...] the negligent; and [...] that worst offender of all, the man who deliberately refuses to take his share of exertion and to assist, in their grievous need, those who cry to him for aid and sympathy.*'

The neighbourhood of the town was visited by members of the Committee, previous to an issue of tickets, and the more remote townlands were placed under the charge of two residents in each. The soup was made in the town and conveyed into the country daily by a cart, to those several stations at which the country people assembled to receive their shares. (6)

He insists on the collective nature of the effort: *'Lists of the poor are made; materials purchased; the wealthy contribute with their stores; the shopkeeper from his earnings; the policeman or soldier from his day's pay; the whole community is instinct and alive with the genuine spirit of practical charity'* (6). Given that the current orthodoxy is moving towards a position that involves Ireland paying for her own misfortunes, the British élite is being shown a concrete example of the capacity of a landlord-led community to respond to the challenge of the famine. But it seems particularly important to stress that the image he conveys is of an entire society, not simply the landlords, organising and paying for this form of relief. This is a shared effort, not one – as the Government is attempting to enforce – limited exclusively to the land-owning class.

The text moves on to detail one final area of involvement: the operation of public works under the Labour Rate Act (August 1846), by which the *'Lord Lieutenant was empowered to order [...] Extraordinary Presentment Sessions for any barony or half-barony wherein "distress was represented to exist"'* (7).²⁴ This section, which is used by Adair for pedagogical purposes – he goes over the details of the Irish Poor Law system for the benefit of *'the English reader'* –, although supposedly devoted to *'public works'*, is designed to focus attention on an aspect of the measure that most interested him. The key reference here is to *'Labouchère's letter'*, a document issued by the Chairman of the Board of Public Works in Dublin, Henry Labouchère, applying to areas where the state of the existing infrastructure did not require public works (roads, harbours, etc.), and authorising landlords, the principal rate-payers, to commission works on their private property: this was referred to as *'reproductive employment'*, i.e. *'works of a reproductive character and permanent utility'*,²⁵ for example, draining or reclaiming privately-owned land. Adair hails this as an intelligent – because flexible – response to the situation, all the more that the money spent in rates by the landlords (on the basis of the Poor Law valuation) can serve to pay wages to improve their own property.

There are a number of things to be borne in mind with regard to what Adair has to say about the practical aspects of his experience. There is first and foremost an economic frame, heavily coloured by what Adair sees as a moral imperative. He

²⁴ Cormac Ó GRÁDA points out that by March 1847, i.e. when the Adair pamphlet is being published, *'a vast army of almost three-quarters of a million was employed, at less than a subsistence wage, on works which made little sense in terms of either economy or their goal of staving off famine'* (*The Great Irish Famine* [1989], Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995, p. 37).

²⁵ H. Labouchère issued this letter on 5th October 1846. For the text of the letter, see Rev. John O'ROURKE, *The History of the Great Famine of 1847* [1874], Dublin: James Duffy & Co., 1902, Note D, p. 549.

sees public works as part of the broad panoply of measures required to ensure the transition of the poorer sections of the Irish population towards '*habits of regular employment*' (4) based on wages, a pre-requisite to the long-term stabilisation of the Irish economy. Adair returns at several points in the pamphlet to the idea that the famine has ushered in what he calls '*a new order of things*' (13), '*a new state of things*' (21), the central aspect of which is '*convert[ing] the cottiers into labourers*' (21). Although '*Government employment was the sole means of keeping society together in many districts and will be found to contain the germ of a new and, as I believe, efficient principle in the distribution of labour*' (7), ultimately, regeneration must be '*from within*': a '*new spirit must be breathed into the quivering limbs of the social body*' (10). It will be up to the landlord class to guide and accompany that transition by taking advantage of the fact that '*in Ireland, where feudalism of tradition is still so rife and tradition one great means of social control, a power waits upon the steps of the descendant of an old family, unknown probably in the oldest properties in England*' (11). The landlord class is, according to Adair, ideally placed as the natural leader of '*an intelligent and self-reliant community*' (6) to structure the collective response to the crisis in collaboration with Government.

Apart from this economic dimension, there is also a strong social subtext. The labourers he had seen on his arrival in Ballymena '*presented, in the early part of the winter, if not a threatening front, still an ill-regulated and uncivilized deportment*' (4). Throughout the text, although as part of Adair's edulcorated presentation it is consistently understated, the potential for social upheaval is clear.²⁶ This was indeed a preoccupation at the period. There had been food riots in Dublin in January 1847, involving attacks on bread carts and shops by '*mobs*' of up to 300 men.²⁷ It is also to be noted that the pamphlet is published in 1847, at a time when Young Ireland is in the process of splitting away from the O'Connellite Repeal Association specifically over the issue of physical force.²⁸ The outbreaks of violence in this phase of the crisis – though fewer and less intense than one might have imagined – would lead to the Crime and Outrage (Ireland) Act being passed in December 1847 in the face of an upsurge in agrarian violence directed against landlords using their right to evict for non-payment of rent. Cooperation between Government and the landlord class – he eludes the problem that many are absentee – is, according to Adair, the key to containing this potential violence.

Consolidation and colonization

The remainder of the pamphlet is designed to comment on and challenge aspects of '*pending legislation*' (2) that was going through Parliament as Adair was writing his pamphlet and that was to become the Poor Law Amendment Act in June 1847. This text would signal a new departure in Government policy by allowing Boards of Guardians to authorize outdoor relief to certain categories of destitute '*impotent*' poor – the infirm, the aged and widows with at least two dependent

²⁶ Elsewhere, for example, he says that public works are preferable than '*to suffer discontent to fester amongst huge masses of the desperate*' (7).

²⁷ *Illustrated London News*, 16 January 1847.

²⁸ Young Ireland, which was behind the failed rebellion in 1848, seceded from the Repeal Association over the use of physical force for political ends in July 1847.

children – a measure designed to free space in the workhouses for the destitute able-bodied prepared to take the workhouse ‘test’.²⁹ The text displaced the burden of payment for relief entirely on to the shoulders of landed property in Ireland. However, in its final version, the Act was to include a clause, the so-called ‘quarter-acre’ or ‘Gregory clause’ (after the Irish landlord and MP, William Gregory, who introduced it), which declared that those occupying more than a quarter of an acre of land would be ineligible for relief. In the event, this would have the effect of forcing many small holders either to give up their title to their small holding in order to benefit from relief or face starvation. In circumstances where a tenant in distress failed to pay rent, the landlord might choose to evict, and would thus recuperate the title, thereby allowing further consolidation.³⁰

Adair discusses these issues in his pamphlet. He is firmly opposed to some of the provisions under discussion; on other points he is infinitely more favourable. He is firmly opposed on ideological – and clearly primarily on financial – grounds to the idea of proposing outdoor relief to the infirm, the old and children in order to create space in the workhouse for able-bodied paupers. He is convinced that the ‘workhouse test’ will not in itself be enough to discourage the destitute and that once the able-bodied see that the Union is prepared to look after them they will settle in to a life of dependency and thus avoid entering the labour market. He paints the (grotesquely unlikely) picture of the workhouse as a convivial space, acting as a magnet for ‘every idler without the walls [of the workhouse]’: ‘But now [he] will not be alone; the comrades of his mendicancy, the brethren of his order, will combine to form a very jovial society. The restraints of discipline will be felt but lightly by men who have food, shelter and companionship’ (16).³¹ Interestingly, he is also disturbed at the potential danger involved when ‘large communities of reckless men, idle, perforce, [are formed] within the walls’ (16).

The policy of emptying the workhouses of their present inmates is also seen as representing a particular risk to the young who will be plunged back into ‘the moral slough from which they had been extricated’ (16). His concern for the welfare of this category of pauper is inextricably linked in to what he sees as the new possibilities of ‘social control’ opened up by the famine. The workhouse is seen as an ideal opportunity to give them training and: ‘general discipline [...]. Industrial schools might be combined with the teaching schools; farm labour on land rented by the Union, with the support of adults’ (16). In Adair’s long-term strategy, such training will be invaluable, in that the workhouse experience will ‘aid most powerfully in forming habits of mutual dependence and control’ (16). Unions represent what he calls: ‘the most effective machines for dealing with the question of the distribution of

²⁹ The Act also foresaw the possibility of outdoor relief being given to the able-bodied poor if the workhouses were full or if disease was rife.

³⁰ For the impact of the ‘Quarter-acre’ clause, see KINEALY, *The Great Calamity*, op. cit., pp. 216-227.

³¹ As the local historian, Brian LOGAN, points out in *Ballymena during the Famine* (op. cit., pp. 52-53), Adair chooses not to say that the Ballymena Workhouse was by this stage ‘badly overcrowded, disease was rife, diet and medical attention were hopelessly inadequate [...] Numbers peaked at the end of the first week of March with 1,229 inmates, of whom 685 were children’.

labour' (16) and therefore offer an ideal space in which to begin the 'regeneration' of the Irish *Masse Mensch*.³²

But he is not opposed to the emerging legislation *in toto*. Regarding one key question that was finally to be addressed so efficiently by the Gregory Clause, he claims that expropriation of the smallholder would be totally justified, arguing that if property is used as the basis on which to calculate the rates for the upkeep of the poor, the same rule should apply to those seeking alms – '*the property of the chargeable poor should be made liable to its share of assessment*' (19). If this property is in the form of '*an occupation of land which is insufficient for his support*', then the pauper '*has committed an act of bankruptcy; and the public, to whom he becomes indebted for his support, is entitled to administer his estate in diminution of the charge incurred*' (19). Interestingly, he suggests the Union should acquire this land '*for the interest of the public*' (19). In the final version of the act, the clause was not used as he suggested to create blocks of land to be administered by the Boards of Guardians for the purposes of training the poor to better habits of work; rather it was used by the individual landlords themselves to consolidate the land on their own estates, thus allowing them to '*clear*' their property of the surplus population that Adair had been complaining about in the opening sections of the pamphlet: '*the great change in Ireland will be to fling into the permanent money-wages labour-market all the cottier tenants, many small tenants and also a large class of men such as those I have described, previously unknown as labourers*' (18).³³ It is interesting to see how in the course of the pamphlet Adair's net has widened well beyond the '*almost mendicant, but not migratory class so numerous about Ireland*' who constituted the initial target of his indignation to include increasingly large sections of the population, earmarked for clearance, dispersal and absorption into the labour market.

According to Adair – and many others – the primary problem in Ireland is the multiplication of tenancies leading to increasingly impoverished smallholders who at the very best of times are barely capable of surviving at subsistence level. Consolidation of land holding is seen as the necessary means by which the Irish land system – and by extension the entire economy of the island³⁴ – will be reformed and modernised: '*the holding which has proved too small for the occupier must henceforth be merged in some larger farm*' (19). Adair insists that this is a *sine qua non* for the economic 'regeneration' of Irish agriculture. He sees the catastrophe of the famine as offering the circumstances that will allow that fundamental

³² The lexicon identifies the Poor Law institutions as '*the distributive machinery of a new principle*', indicating that Adair conceives his strategy for imposing a wage-based economy in terms of an industrial imaginary.

³³ The added advantage of consolidation was that of reducing the rates bill of the landlords concerned: under the terms of 6 & 7 Vict., c.92, 1843, landlords, on top of the rates for their own property, were forced to pay the rate bill for holdings valued at £4 or less, a veritable incentive to be rid of smallholders. As things stood, the landlord paid around 60% of the rate bill.

³⁴ Elsewhere (10), he says: '*the predominant industry will probably be agricultural and the national improvement will therefore be rather evinced in the condition of the agricultural than of the urban population*'.

restructuring of the economy. He seems totally blind to the appalling human hardship that this will entail.

His concluding section is designed to demonstrate to the Government how the circumstances of the famine can be turned to the advantage of all concerned and that a strategy that has already been put in place by some (to his mind, visionary) landlords – assisting their tenants to emigrate³⁵ – should be given Government support. His argument has shown how the famine has revealed a hitherto unquantified workforce, and had created the circumstances for a fundamental redefinition of the labour market. His section on the children in the workhouse had allowed him to identify yet a further, particularly malleable source of labour to be exploited. Having already painted a positively idyllic image of the treatment of pauper children and famine orphans by the workhouse system (*'it was unspeakably pleasant to visit the children's schoolrooms and to see four hundred children rescued, for a season at least, from hunger and evil example, clean, happy and in health'*, 6), he returns to the theme in a memorable passage stating:

The Union-houses in Ireland are now full of children, many of whom will never return to the outer world. Their parents will not re-enter their miserable dwellings, having once tasted the cup of dependence, or they are dead and the children will have no relatives to receive them. In the Union with which I am most familiarly acquainted, of 1150 inmates, 500 were children under fifteen years of age [...]. But they are already trained and fashioned to discipline, with unbroken constitutions and the instincts of organization, severed from home ties, uninfluenced by local prejudices; let them, under the protection of the state, go forth to aid in cultivating and subduing those regions where their willing industry will ensure remuneration. (21)

His vision is one of a mobile work force on an imperial scale. Moving from the industrial to the military metaphor, he sees them being organised along military lines: *'Give them the discipline and regularity of troops. Feed them like troops. Give them colonization houses'* (23). His final point is to propose that emigration should be financed not only by the landlords but also by the other main beneficiary, *'the Government, on behalf of the Empire, whose solid power is augmented by every emigrant transplanted to her colonial possessions'* (22).

Conclusion

The pamphlet highlights a number of glaring blind spots in Adair's thinking. Some of these reflect frames he would have shared with many at the period: the harshness of the mind-set that can extol the virtues of the workhouse system in such moralistic and unrealistic terms, the cold-bloodedness involved in his plans for mass clearance and forced emigration and the blatant individual and class self-interest with which he analyses the implications of the appalling suffering around him. But

³⁵ *'The proprietor, a humane and judicious man, has expended large sums in promoting emigration as the means of diminishing this horde of human beings, useless to themselves and destructive to his property'* (12).

others are more directly linked to his own world vision and (at times questionable) political acumen.

On emigration for example, it is interesting to see how according to his plan the erstwhile Irish cottier and assorted fellow travellers, whom Adair had depicted wallowing in ignorance and filth, are miraculously metamorphosed into the creators 'under other skies', of '*British homes within the circumference of the British Empire*' (21). If Adair is aware that the social upheaval engendered by the famine was going to generate movements of population on a massive scale, he apparently had no understanding that a great proportion of the resulting diaspora, far from seeing itself as involved in a strategy of imperial construction, would leave Ireland with a deep hatred not only of Britain and of the Union but especially of the landlord class Adair seeks to defend. Of those who choose emigration and who survive, many will go to the United States, bringing with them a resentment that will result in the creation of a revolutionary movement, the Irish Republican Brotherhood, that will internationalise a crisis the British Government had sought to contain with an island frame. Far from Adair's idea expressed in the opening sections of the pamphlet that '*each nation [i.e. Ireland and Britain] is fitted by nature to be the companion to the other*' and that '*this unparalleled affliction [the famine] which has desolated one country may unite both yet more closely*' (2), the radicalisation of a minority within what the Scotch-Irish were to call the '*famine Irish*' will effect a number of key connections – between the land question and constitutional freedom and between violence and politics – that will totally redefine the situation inside Ireland³⁶ and her relationship with Britain.³⁷

Similarly, when he is so keen to emphasise that '*the question of the distribution of labour*' is '*the most important of our times*' (16), the reader comes away with the impression that it is apparently more important than the famine itself! Nowhere in the pamphlet do we hear of people in the area dying as a result of the famine or of the appalling diseases it generated. Adair's picture is that of a crisis which, although it had caused considerable suffering and dislocation (Skibbereen – significantly at the other end of the country – is mentioned as an example on at least two occasions), is under control, contained, according to Adair's narrative, through the agency of the landlord class, thanks to the latter's reactivity and proximity to the tenant population. Even if he calculates that the food crisis will not be over until the harvest of 1848, the pamphlet lets it be understood that we are already in the next phase – planning for the post-famine period. And here it is clear that his primary preoccupation is the long-term survival of the land-owning classes who need to be protected from excessive Government pressure. His objective is to have the landlord class recognised as an indispensable agent in the transition that is on-going in Ireland. Just as he puts forward an analysis of a collective response to the famine by

³⁶ The experience of the famine would lead to a dramatic deterioration in the landlord-tenant relationship which would produce the Land War (1880s) which would lead ultimately to pressure for a fundamental re-writing of land tenure in Ireland and the choice by a (future) British administration to opt for peasant ownership – one which Adair explicitly rejects in this text.

³⁷ The IRB was to instigate the first terror campaign in Britain in the 1850s. Much of the finance and logistical support for this campaign came the Irish-American diaspora.

all levels of the ‘community’, so he argues for a system that will see an active collaboration between private property (the landlords) and the Government. For Adair, it would be a mistake to alienate the landlord class, or worse still, to leave them drained financially by what he sees as unjust burdens. If the Government destroys the landlord class by over-taxation – ‘*which amount almost threatens confiscation*’ (9) –, it will lose an invaluable partner.

Although the Government will not listen to what he has to say on tax issues, Adair’s vision as regards consolidation, and the transfer of the cottier, labouring and small farmer class to waged employment in agriculture or industry or to colonisation was to be realised in part, not necessarily however in the ways he imagined. Some consolidation of land holding did come about under the terms of the quarter-acre clause especially in the south and west of Ireland, but that did not prevent a partial collapse of a considerable section of the Irish landed interest. Adair’s presentation of the Irish landlord class as financially insolvent proved to be largely accurate: a combination of increased taxation and falling rental revenues only accentuated the already chronic indebtedness of many estates. The Government would therefore intervene under the terms of the Encumbered Estates Acts (1848 and 1849) to allow for the sale and re-structuring of these properties, with the result that within ten years some 3,000 estates and some five million acres had changed hands. Many of these new landowners would clear tenants in an effort to rationalise their agricultural investment, thus following on the process of consolidation Adair had been advocating.

Adair is quite prophetic in the text when he talks about the effect that the famine will have on the relationship between landlord and tenant: ‘*The times are at hand when it will be better for a proprietor, and for the tenantry, that he should be loved, rather than wealthy*’ (11). It is ironic that much of the tension that was to explode into violence during the Land War in the 1880s and that would ultimately feed into the revolutionary movement would be caused by the resentment generated by policies of clearance to allow the consolidation and the rationalisation of property he advocates.