

# Notes sur Charles Edward Trevelyan

## diverses sources

### [Historical Notes: God and England made the Irish famine](#)

Brendan Graham , *Independent*, 3 December 1998

On 20 August 1845, the day the potato blight *Phytophthora infestans* was first discovered in Dublin's Royal Botanic Gardens, the population of Ireland stood close to nine million people - almost half the combined population of England, Scotland and Wales. Mostly Catholic. Mostly poor.

What was to happen over the next few years was to ensure that by the turn of the century half of Ireland's population had disappeared. Two million acres in Ireland - one-third of all tilled land - was given over to the cultivation of the lumper potato. While five to six million people were heavily dependent on the crop, some three million souls depended on it totally. The lumper was highly prolific and highly nutritious.

The powerful combination of high yield and high nutrient content in this root would, in its absence, also prove to be a deadly combination. For how else were the people to be fed? The Union of Ireland with Great Britain in 1800 had not been a Union of equal partners. Ireland was regarded by Westminster as little more than England's granary. Sir Robert Peel, Prime Minister of the Tory Government up to June 1846, neatly captioned the British viewpoint when he uttered, "The real issue is the improvement of the social and moral condition of the masses of the population", a theme oft repeated.

Charles E. Trevelyan, who served under both Peel and Russell at the Treasury, and had prime responsibility for famine relief in Ireland, was clear about God's role: "*The judgement of God sent the calamity to teach the Irish a lesson, that calamity must not be too much mitigated*".

John Mitchel, the Young Ireland leader, transported in 1848 to Van Diemens Land, had a different view, calling the famine "an artificial famine. Potatoes failed in like manner all over Europe; yet there was no famine save in Ireland. The Almighty, indeed, sent the potato blight, but the English created the famine".

A Trevelyan letter to Edward Twisleton, Chief Poor Law Commissioner in Ireland, contains the censorious, "We must not complain of what we really want to obtain. If small farmers go, and their landlords are reduced to sell portions of their estates to persons who will invest capital we shall at last arrive at something like a satisfactory settlement of the country".

Soup kitchens did keep the Irish alive for a while, some three million daily which is a lasting testament that where there is Government will, so too is there a way. However the free "Soyer's soup" - Alexis Soyer being the French chef at the Savoy hotel who was called in to design a soup for the famine-ridden Irish - if life-preserving for the body, was certainly not the thing for the moral rectitude of the Irish spirit. The soup kitchens were closed.

Relief works were ushered in, which saw starving men, women and children breaking rocks and building "famine roads" - roads which led nowhere - for as little as a sixpenny a day. Peel's philosophy of a free-market economy was in full swing and scarcity meant higher prices. Potatoes were now a penny a piece. A day's labour would gain for you and your family six potatoes. Poetry, music and dancing stopped. The famine killed everything.

Was Britain to blame? Tony Blair in his May 1997 "apology speech" stated that those who governed in London at the time failed their people through standing by while a crop failure turned into a massive human tragedy.

Blair's speech was important to Irish people all over the world in that it officially recognised, for the first time, that the famine was more than just the "Irish potato blight". His words became part of the healing process between the two islands. Next follows admission of culpability and the asking for forgiveness. Finally there is the forgiveness itself. Are we, the Irish, ready yet?

## [The great famine](#)

parliament.uk

Between 1845-52 Ireland suffered a period of starvation, disease and emigration that became known as the Great Famine.

The main cause was a disease which affected the potato crop, upon which a third of Ireland's population was dependent for food.

There had been crop failures before but during the famine it failed across the whole country, and reoccurred over several years.

*Landowners.* Given that a high proportion of Irish MPs were landowners, or their sons, Parliament was fully aware of the situation. Sir Robert Peel, the Prime Minister, purchased £100,000 of Indian corn (sweetcorn) in the United States and arranged for its transport to Cork.

He believed that by selling this cheaply the price of food would be kept low. Meanwhile, a relief commission raised funds and distributed food, and a board of works initiated road building to keep unemployment down.

*Corn Law repeal moves.* Initially, the government's policies met with some success. In 1846 Peel moved to repeal the Corn Laws, tariffs on grain that kept the price of bread artificially high, although this did little to ease the situation in Ireland as the famine worsened.

The repeal of the Corn Laws also split the Conservative Party and when, on 25 June, Peel was defeated on the second reading of an Irish Coercion Bill (designed to combat famine-fuelled violence), he resigned as Prime Minister four days later.

*Ineffective.* A new government led by Lord John Russell did not handle the famine effectively. Public works projects achieved little, while Sir Charles Trevelyan, who was in charge of the relief effort, limited government aid on the basis of laissez-faire principles and an evangelical belief that "the judgement of God sent the calamity to

teach the Irish a lesson". Parliament legislated to place the financial onus for famine relief on Irish landowners, who in turn tried to save money by ejecting tenants from their land.

*How many died?* Assessments of how many people died during the Great Famine, either of disease or hunger, stands at around 1,000,000. This, along with emigration to escape the famine, significantly reduced the population of Ireland. It also had a revolutionary impact on Irish politics, becoming a defining moment for Irish nationalists. The famine was also the backdrop for Daniel O'Connell's exit from Parliament. Already seriously ill, in February 1847 he implored the House of Commons to treat Ireland with generosity. He died, en route to Rome, three months later.

## Charles Edward Trevelyan

*Tomás O'Riordan, Multitext Project in Irish History, May 2014*

Charles Edward Trevelyan was born 2 April 1807, in Taunton, England. His father George (1764–1827) was an Anglican archdeacon. He was educated at Taunton grammar school, Charterhouse, and East India College, Haileybury. In 1826 he joined the East India Company's Bengal civil service.

In 1827 he was appointed assistant to Sir Charles Metcalfe, the Commissioner at Delhi. He devoted himself to improving the conditions of the Indian population and tackling corrupt British administration there. He also donated some of his own money for public works in Delhi. He carried out inquiries that led to the abolition of transit duties which had long hindered the internal trade of India. In 1831 he was removed to Calcutta, and became the Deputy Secretary to the government in the political department.

Trevelyan was especially anxious to give Indians a European education. In 1835, largely owing to his persistence, the Government decided to educate the Indians in European literature and science. He published an account of this in *On the education of the people of India*. In 1838 he returned to England.

In 1840 he became Assistant Secretary to the Treasury in London and held that office until 1859. This position put him in charge of the administration of Government relief to the victims of the Irish Famine in the 1840s. In the middle of that crisis Trevelyan published his views on the matter. He saw the Famine as a '*mechanism for reducing surplus population*'. But it was more:

*'The judgement of God sent the calamity to teach the Irish a lesson, that calamity must not be too much mitigated. ... The real evil with which we have to contend is not the physical evil of the Famine, but the moral evil of the selfish, perverse and turbulent character of the people.'*

Such racist and sectarian views of the Irish were common enough within the English governing classes and were more crudely expressed by others. For the most part, Trevelyan's views reflected the prevailing Whig economic and social opinion and that of the Prime Minister, Lord John Russell, who held office from 1846 until 1852.

Trevelyan was stiff and unbending. He firmly believed in *laissez faire* (essentially, the importing of food should be left to the food merchants), he thought that the Government should not intervene, and warned of the danger that people might get into the habit of depending on the state. From March 1846 he controlled the public works through the disbursement of public funds. Under Trevelyan, relief by public works in 1846–7 was too little too late but also it was slow, inefficient and sometimes corrupt. He defended the export of grain from famine-stricken Ireland on the grounds that the Government should not interfere with free trade. When his own administrators described this export of food as ‘a most serious evil’ Trevelyan refused even to consider banning it. When rioting broke out in protest against the export of corn, he sent 2,000 troops, provisioned with beef, pork and biscuits,

‘to be directed on particular ports at short notice’.

He was against railway construction as a form of relief and successfully opposed Russell’s scheme for the distribution of some £50,000 worth of seed to tenants. The failure of government relief schemes finally became clear to Trevelyan and early in 1847 soup kitchens were organised under a high-level government commission. It worked badly.

In the autumn of 1847, Trevelyan ended government-sponsored aid to the distressed Poor Law districts although there was an outbreak of cholera. He declared that the Famine was over, and that from now on Irish landlords were to be responsible for financing relief works. He gained a well-deserved reputation as a cold-hearted and uncompassionate administrator. On 27 April 1848 he was given a knighthood for his services to Ireland. *The Irish Crisis* published in 1848 contains his unsympathetic views on the Famine and its victims.

After the Famine in Ireland, he continued to play an important role in government in England and its colonies. In 1853 he headed an inquiry on how to improve the civil service. His work transformed it. Higher educational standards and competitive admission examinations made the civil service better qualified and more efficient. Regarded as the father of the modern civil service, he was portrayed as Sir Gregory Hardlines in Anthony Trollope’s novel *The three clerks* (1858).

In 1858, after the uprising known as the Indian Mutiny, Trevelyan returned to India as governor of Madras where his reforms were important, especially police reform.

He returned to India as finance minister from 1862 to 1865. His time in office was marked by important administrative reforms and by extensive measures for the development of the resources of India by means of public works. He was made a baronet in 1874. On his return England in 1865 he directed his energy to the organisation of the army. Later he got involved in a variety of social problems, notably, charities and pauperism. He died at 67 Eaton Square, London, 19 June 1886.