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**IRELAND: THE "PROMISED LAND"  
OF MALTHUSIAN THEORY?**

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## IRELAND: THE “PROMISED LAND” OF MALTHUSIAN THEORY?

Abstract: The legitimacy of Malthusian thinking as a major element in development theory and policy rests on a few classic cases, the most important of which is the great Irish potato famine of the 1840s. This paper demonstrates that Irish underdevelopment and the agrarian crises that characterised it were far less a product of population pressure in a resource-poor country than of the pressures of a colonial export economy on peasant means of subsistence. Far from exemplifying the predictions of Malthusian theory, Ireland was the paradigmatic European colony which, if anything, suffered not from Malthusian pressures but from Malthusian policies.

*Begin with pauperizing the inhabitants of a country and when there is no more profit to be ground out of them, when they have grown a burden...drive them away.*

Karl Marx

*The corn crops were sufficient to feed the island, but the landlords would have their rents in spite of famine, and in defiance of fever. They took the whole harvest and left hunger to those who raised it. Had the people of Ireland been the landlords of Ireland, not a single human creature would have died of hunger, nor the failure of the potato been considered a matter of any consequence.*

James Finton Lalor

### 1. Introduction

At a time when Malthusian thinking is resuming a major role in national and international policy, when population pressure is increasingly viewed as a preeminent cause of poverty and environmental degradation (Myers 1994; Ehrlich, Ehrlich and Daily 1993), and the market and free trade are regarded as the only viable mechanisms for balancing population and economic resources, it is worthwhile to examine one of the relatively few historical cases that have been used routinely to confer legitimacy on the Malthusian paradigm. Toward that end, the present paper addresses the experience of Ireland, taking the English colonial system which absorbed it as the framework within which Malthusian ideas were used to explain or legitimise Irish poverty in general and the particular features of Irish agrarian underdevelopment in particular.

As Malthusian thinking<sup>1</sup> developed in intimate relationship with the momentous changes that characterised British capitalism at the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth

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<sup>1</sup> Malthusian theory, ostensibly about population, is actually more about the nature and the origins of poverty. When Reverend Thomas Malthus published *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798), there was already a long-established view that poverty was natural and irredeemable. But, what Malthus did was purport to describe a “law of nature” which not only made poverty and misery seem to be the fate of the majority of humankind, but which, in the process, appeared to make all forms of progressive intervention

century, the position of Ireland within the British economic system guaranteed that it inevitably would occupy a special place in the repertoire of Malthusianism. So, early in the nineteenth century, a consensus began to emerge that colonial Ireland was a resource-poor country whose poverty was principally the result of surplus population. Over the next half century, this view rigidified into one of the great myths of Malthusian theory and, as such, came to figure significantly in Western conceptualisations of the very nature of underdevelopment. This paper seeks to correct many of the central misapprehensions about the interrelationship of Irish poverty, population and economic development which Malthusianism not only helped to elaborate, but from which it has derived much intellectual legitimacy over the years. In the process, it suggests some of the fallacies and limitations of contemporary Malthusian thought.

In the early eighteen-twenties, the English industrialist and utopian socialist, Robert Owen, had proposed that Ireland was “competent to maintain, not only its own inhabitants, but more than double the whole population of Great Britain and Ireland, in comfort heretofore unattained by any nation or people, at any period of the world.” (1823:22) Allowing for an excess of exuberance, Owen had comprehended one of the basic realities of Irish history: that the colonial economy which England constructed in Ireland had been designed, not to diminish its considerable agricultural capacity, but to ensure that it served English rather than Irish needs.

Owen’s observation was a reaction to the fact that, by the beginning of the nineteenth century, recurrent agricultural crises in Ireland were increasingly regarded as a reflection, not of English rule, but of surplus population. A pivotal moment in the elaboration of this view had been when Malthus himself, in an anonymous review of the work of Thomas Newenham (1805), which appeared in *The Edinburgh Review*, had suggested that Ireland was overpopulated. But, it was the so-called Great Famine of 1846-49, which would provide what seemed like definitive confirmation of this judgement and which, in the process, helped to consolidate the argument that Irish underdevelopment was largely due to endogenous factors, rather than to English colonial rule. It so marked Ireland, in Marx’s words, “as the promised land of the principle of population,” that, a century after Owen’s remarks, it was commonly accepted that the Famine had occurred chiefly because “population had increased up to the limit of subsistence.” (Griffin 1926:61-62)

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counterproductive. Briefly, Malthus and his followers viewed the pressure of population on resources --in particular, food supplies-- as the paramount cause of most human misery, and the effects of such misery -- disease, starvation, etc.-- as the principal means (the so-called "positive checks") by which that pressure could be alleviated. Malthus considered that there might be preventive checks, such as delayed marriage, to which he later added (in 1803) what he called "moral restraint," but, to the end of his life, he regarded anything more direct and effective (e.g., non-coital sex, coitus interruptus, abortion, infanticide, contraception) as a "vice." (Malthus 1830)

It was hardly in England's interest to admit that rural distress and periodic famine were actually the results of its colonial rule. That rule had not only made agricultural crises endemic, it had created for Ireland a special role within the British economy and political culture. As the earliest English colony, Ireland had set the stage for future colonisation. It was the "colonial prototype" which served as the strategic and intellectual model that defined subsequent encounters, from North American Indians to Indian peasants (Cook 1993). It directly subsidised other colonial ventures, particularly the plantations of the English Caribbean, which Irish agricultural output sustained to a singular degree. And eventually, England's ascendancy as the first and paramount industrial nation in Europe also depended upon Ireland providing a reservoir of cheap labour and agricultural products. It was inevitable, then, that Ireland came to play a crucial role in assumptions about the causes and consequences of underdevelopment in general. If the Malthusian paradigm predominates today among models of underdevelopment, it is partly because the great Irish famine of 1846-48 was taken as the definitive embodiment of its essential principles. It is widely regarded as *the* classic Malthusian crisis, the culmination of a half century during which the population of rural Ireland seemed to press steadily on the country's means of subsistence.

Yet, as we have explored elsewhere (Ross 1986), Malthusian theory could never rely solely on the presumption that the poor --Irish or otherwise-- simply allowed their fertility to go unchecked, since this never actually seemed to be the case (Harris and Ross 1987). It depended, therefore, on some variant of the premise that the poor were not rational enough to practice sufficient self-restraint. In the case of Ireland, demographic growth was largely attributed to a seemingly irrational dependence on the potato, which was believed to have transformed that lack of restraint into a classic Malthusian tragedy. As one anonymous writer put it,

The fatal luxuriance with which this vegetable flourished in the soil of Ireland, caused population to run fearfully ahead of the requirements and capabilities of the country.

This was the view expressed by Malthus himself as early as 1808 (Semmel 1963:36). As a result, according to the conventional scenario, when the fungus, *Phytophthora infestans*, destroyed most of the potato crop in the 1840's, the Irish population, with nothing else to sustain it, inevitably crashed. The ensuing famine was therefore regarded as an exemplary case of what occurred when Malthus's preventative checks had seemingly failed.

This popular account of the wellsprings of the Irish potato famine assures us that increasing dependence on the potato, an American cultigen introduced into Ireland probably in the seventeenth century (Salaman 1985), encouraged early marriage and land-subdivision because "Irish men and women were prepared to live almost exclusively on potatoes." (Drake 1969:66). The implication is that the Irish were too easily satisfied with the most basic

standard of living that the potato could readily supply. As a result, the potato was the catalyst for a "gradually accelerating increase in population growth relative to available resources, so that crop failure in the 19th century brought mass starvation." (Abernethy 1979:97) According to this reasoning, it was only the trauma of the famine that finally induced a fundamental change in the formerly profligate reproductive habits of the Irish, triggering a pattern of delayed marriage, high rates of celibacy and emigration (cf. Bodley 1976:89; Friedl and Ellis 1976:23-24).

Over time, this general scenario has been pared down until it has attained an epigrammatic quality. In a popular textbook, for example, Harris refers to how "The potato was taken to Ireland where it produced a population explosion followed by crop failures, a famine, and a mass exodus to America." (1971:190) As to why the potato had such an effect, the consensus has been that it summoned forth certain intrinsic traits in the Irish. In his eccentric work, *The Evolution of Man and Society*, the prominent English plant geneticist, C.D. Darlington, wrote of how

The growth of the potato had in a hundred years doubled the population of Ireland. The Irish cultivator had at last found a crop whose dangerously easy cultivation suited his temperament (Darlington 1969:454).

More recently, the eminent Italian demographer, Massimo Livi-Bacci, in his book, *A Concise History of World Population*, has recapitulated the arguments advanced over 40 years ago by K. H. Connell (1950). Although he glancingly acknowledges that England played in Ireland (referring briefly to English demand for Irish food during the Napoleonic War), he effectively endorses Connell's thesis that the Irish had "a natural tendency" to marry early. Connell related this to "their improvident temperament," suggesting --like Darlington-- the operation of innate character traits. This, according to Livi-Bacci, had formerly been inhibited by land scarcity, but was unleashed by the advent of the potato which was so productive per acre that people could subsist easily on smaller holdings and indulge their natural inclinations (1992:62-63). Thus, he confidently asserts that "*one may accuse the potato of having impoverished Irish peasantry.*" (Livi Bacci 1992:63; my italics)

England is completely vindicated, precisely because such accounts leave out any understanding of the process by which the potato acquired a significance in the Irish rural economy which made the rural poor so vulnerable. What is left is little more than Darlington and Connell's view, that the potato somehow especially appealed to certain inborn propensities of the Irish. Yet, even after 1700, the Irish diet was not automatically confined to the potato (Lucas 1960; Cullen 1981). That situation evolved over a century and a half, in response to the increasing subordination of the Irish economy to English rule, as Ireland had become increasingly productive as an export economy in direct proportion to the growing dependence of the rural Irish on the potato.



## 2. English Colonial Rule and the “Limits of Subsistence”

The hegemony of England over Ireland may be traced back to the Anglo-Norman invasions which began as early as the twelfth century. Thus, long before the Industrial Revolution, Ireland, according to the English historian, James Froude, "was regarded as a colony to be administered, not for her own benefit, but for the convenience of the mother country." (quoted in MacNeil 1886:15) This meant, on the one hand, that the Irish environment would be exploited in a way which subserved the interests of the English crown and the English market, and that, on the other, the Irish people --in the absence of sufficient industry to absorb their labour at home-- would provide a cheap, flexible labour force for the use of England.

Military incursions, land confiscations, paralegal interventions, all contributed to the establishment of a relatively manageable colonial regime which left Ireland with only fictive autonomy. As early as 1495, all the laws passed by its Parliament had to be approved by the English Privy Council. This, admittedly, did not mean that Ireland was wholly pacified and, for the next two centuries, the English had to assert their dominance with periodic military campaigns. In 1649, Cromwell --still regarded in England as the champion of Parliamentary democracy-- himself led an invasion which was meant, not just to take Ireland in the name of the Puritan Commonwealth, but to carve it up among the merchants and speculators who had bankrolled Parliament's army. Ireland's population was decimated within the next few years; thousands of Irish prisoners were shipped to the West Indies (Williams 1944:13), while English and Scottish settlers were brought in to fill the vacuum (Morton 1979:264). Catholic land ownership was reduced from about 59 percent in 1641 to 22 percent over the next four decades (James 1973:21). By 1703, after a major military intervention by William of Orange in his war with James II, another wave of land confiscation further reduced Irish Catholic landownership to a mere 14 percent (James 1973:21; Hechter 1975:103-104). At the same time, England pressured the Protestant-controlled Irish Parliament into passing a series of what were loosely called “penal laws,” which collectively consolidated Anglo-Irish power and privilege by depriving Catholics of their basic political, social and economic rights. Between 1695 and 1727, they were forbidden to buy land, bear arms, own a horse worth more than five pounds, become lawyers, etc. (James 1973:22-24).

In 1801, Ireland and England were officially joined into one kingdom. Mokyr has tried to minimise the adverse impact of this development, suggesting that Ireland only stood to benefit by becoming "part of a large economic unit which also happened to contain the most advanced industrial nation in the world," (1985:288) but the fact is that it sealed the fate of Ireland's poor, while effectively obscuring Ireland's colonial status. Of course, as far as most of the Irish were concerned, the Act of Union merely formalised a loss of sovereignty which had begun centuries earlier. But, the timing was crucial. The war with Napoleon's France

was costly and the union enabled England to tap the rich reserves of Ireland's treasury. Within the first 16 years of the union, Ireland's national debt rose 250 percent, compared with only 50 percent for England (Kennedy 1973:33); and, when the exchequers of the two countries were actually combined in 1817, Ireland --which had been one of the most prosperous countries in Western Europe at the turn of the century-- was virtually bankrupt (Smart 1964:488).

When the English first attempted to colonise it, the Irish economy had been largely pastoral, with milch cows providing the dietary staples of milk and cheese.. As late as 1600, extensive forests (McCracken 1971:15-22) had also provided mast for foraging swine, so that there was a steady supply of pork as well. Cereal cultivation rounded out the diet (Lucas 1960). This picture changed dramatically in the course of the next two centuries. Wars that destroyed fields of grain gave considerable inducement to increasing dependence on the newly introduced tuber which survived rampaging armies (Salaman 1943:15-16; Longfield 1929:116, 204). The potato also appealed to landlords who saw in it a remarkable opportunity to create an economy geared to export trade with the emerging Caribbean plantations. Because it markedly increased caloric output per acre and could be grown over a wider range of micro-habitats --including poorer, wetter soils-- than grains, landlords encouraged tenants to cultivate the potato, enabling them in turn to take over more prime land for pasture or wheat.

By the middle of the seventeenth century, the colonial economy of Ireland was given over to grazing cattle to such an extent that, according to Crotty, it had “what was certainly the largest livestock export trade in the world at that time.” (1982:107) Some animals were shipped to England to be fattened for the London market. But, it was the development of a provisions trade with England's Caribbean colonies that distinguished this period. After 1660, under pressure from English cattle farmers, protectionist legislation prohibited the import of Irish animals, leaving Irish graziers little choice except to engage in a provisions trade which in the end proved to be extremely lucrative for them and essential for the growth of the West Indies plantation economy. As the book, *The Interest of England in the Preservation of Ireland*, published in 1689, observed,

The islands and plantations of America are in a manner wholly sustained by the vast quantities of beef, pork, butter, and other provisions of the product of Ireland (quoted in O'Donovan 1940:73).

This remained the case until the 1760's, when Ireland exported a total of 213,000 barrels of beef per annum, 50 percent of which went to the plantations, 48 percent to the continent and only one percent to Britain. But, significant changes in this pattern began to occur toward the middle of the eighteenth century when the demand in England for Irish foodstuffs increased and gradually took priority over the provisions trade with the West Indies. This shift reflected various factors. The combined effects of English industrial expansion and urbanisation

created considerable pressure on food supplies in the manufacturing districts. The onset of the Napoleonic Wars which cut off England from its continental food supplies added to the problem, and there were periods of real nutritional distress after 1795 (Wells 1988; Boner 1955).

The passage of Foster's Corn Law in 1748, which lifted restrictions on the importation of Irish cereals (Hechter 1975:85), had guaranteed that meat and dairy products were not Ireland's sole exports. But, it took the war to shift the emphasis of Irish production decisively toward grain. By 1800, the total export of beef had fallen to 147,382 barrels --most of which (79 percent) now went to Britain. And as land use became more intensive and potatoes became an even more important part of the rural Irish household economy, the rearing of pigs (to the outsider, another hallmark of Irish peasant poverty) grew in importance, as potatoes provided an important source of fodder (cf. Ross 1983:103-104). This was reflected in the marked increase in pork exports between 1764 and 1800, from 30,328 barrels to 107,530. The proportion which was exported to Britain rose from virtually zero to 87 percent (O Donovan 1940:114-116).

While grain took over significantly from cattle rearing, the latter was never wholly displaced, however, largely because it was a crucial resource for the provisioning of the English army during this period. In 1813, toward the end of the Napoleonic Wars, the British War Office's Commissariat contracted for 14.3 million lbs. of Irish salted beef, in addition to 12.6 million lbs. of salted pork (House of Commons 1836:514). Between 1813 and 1835, it acquired almost 70 million lbs of salted beef and 78 million lbs of salted pork from Ireland (House of Commons 1838:514).

Despite this, cattle grazing generally diminished as the wartime economy stimulated a more intensive agricultural regime, both in England and Ireland (Jones 1983). This was reflected in an explosive rise in Irish grain exports from 31,423 barrels in 1771-73 to over 863,000 by 1791 (Newenham 1805:48-50). This more intensive land use depended on allocating more land for commercial production and on an increased work force.

### **3. The Ascendancy of the Potato**

Landlords sought to achieve these ends by encouraging tenants to grow more potatoes on marginal land where it could produce well, and using it as an inducement for them to marry earlier and raise children on smaller holdings.

Among the various incentives for the poor was the fact that the potato was one of the few major food crops that was not tithed (Gill 1925:35-36). But, the chief virtue of the potato --

for landlord and tenant alike-- was undoubtedly its productivity. In *The Wealth of Nations*, Adam Smith had already advocated the use of the potato as a means of improving landlords' profits. But, the essential point is that the drive to expand acreage in cereals --and the pressure it placed on subsistence production-- would not have been possible if the potato had not been productive and versatile enough to guarantee peasants a basic livelihood. So, it is not surpris that it was during this period of increasing commercialisation of Irish agriculture that the potato steadily rose to prominence in the rural diet. As it did, the role of pigs --to the outsider, another hallmark of Irish peasant poverty-- also became greater, since the potato was not only a major food crop, but an important source of fodder as well (cf. Ross 1983:103-104). Thus, pig production increased as beef output fell.

As far as landlords were concerned, increasing cereal production and the competition it generated among a land-hungry rural population, tended to drive up rents --which, in some districts, rose as much as 85 percent between 1746 and 1783 (Johnson 1970:229). As a result, their pro-natalist policies, which would not have been possible in the absence of the potato, proved especially rewarding. There is certainly little evidence that rising population during the late eighteenth century had a damaging effect on the Irish economy in general. On the contrary, it was a major factor underlying an unprecedented increase in the prosperity of the ruling class. By 1805, Thomas Newenham was observing that

We know that within these last five-and-twenty years the rent of land has doubled in most places and trebled in many. We know that a vast number of superb country mansions, besides splendid townhouses, have been built within these last twenty years: a circumstance which clearly evinces a very great increase of wealth among the landlords of Ireland (Newenham 1805:143).

This had happened largely because the Irish peasantry was forced to live on a steadily contracting subsistence base, dominated by the potato.

Yet, by the beginning of the nineteenth century, Malthusian biases had helped to portray the potato as the source of virtually all of Ireland's problems, especially the putative one of over-population. Elsewhere in Europe, however, although the potato had become a popular crop, but there is no obvious or consistent association with demographic trends. As Morineau has observed for France, for example,

in considering the regions where population growth had taken hold after 1745, one cannot help but recognize that while some of them had adopted the potato, others (Languedoc, Ile-de-France) had not...There is no universal correlation between the spread of the potato and demographic growth (1979:22-23).

The way in which the English assigned responsibility to the potato for triggering a great upturn in Irish population which ultimately was held accountable for the 1840's famine,

depended, not on any concrete evidence, but on the *racist* view that the Irish were content to live solely on the potato, because they were lazy and unambitious and because the potato could satisfy all their apparent wants. Few, if any, other peoples in Europe had to endure such opprobrium for having embraced the potato as a staple crop which was widely respected for its ability to grow in areas where grain was marginal. Ireland was not the only country where it had proven capable of opening up new zones for food and fodder production. But, only in Ireland, where a colonial power sought endless justifications for its policies, was reliance on the potato closely associated with the negative characterisations that the Irish suffered. Thus, Niven wrote, as the blight was spreading in 1846, how

It may well seem strange, that rational and intelligent men, with heads upon their shoulders, and hands capable of working, should, by their indolence and want of common energy, have so long cheated themselves of even the common comforts of life (Niven 1846:23)

because of their over-dependence on their "favourite root." (Niven 1846:21).

Only in Ireland, among the potato-eating regions of Europe, was the vicious circle posited, that the potato made people lazy while their laziness led them to depend solely on the potato. In the English mind, the potato somehow summoned forth the worst traits of the Irish, traits which the English, as colonial rulers, already believed --or needed to believe-- were there.

The journals of Elizabeth Smith, written during the 1840's, exemplify this. Elizabeth Smith was an Edinburgh-born woman whose family had moved to India, where she married an officer in the East India Company who, in 1829, took her to live on an estate in County Wicklow that he inherited from his brother. Her diaries are an illuminating blend of perception and prejudice. Even as famine was spreading, in September of 1846, she wrote of how the potato

encouraged idleness, pauper marriages and dirty habits, and neither mind nor body could be fully developed upon such nourishment (1980:101)

A month later she added:

I can't but despise a people so meanspirited, so low-minded, so totally without energy, only I attribute it to the want of animal food; there can be no vigour of mind or body without it (1980:105).

Yet, she was also fully aware that Ireland was a productive country which, in a time of great distress, was actually exporting food. "Provisions continuing to pour into England from Ireland," she wrote, "and yet the Famine said to be pressing there." (1980:105) But, she never made the connection between the impoverished domestic diet of the Irish and the export economy which deprived most of the Irish of their native meat and grain, even in a time of desperate need. Like most of her English contemporaries, she was unable to see Irish

cultivation of the potato in anything but a negative light, to regard it as a product, rather than the cause, of Ireland's impoverishment.

#### 4. Scarcity in the Irish Export Economy

If the general Malthusian view was that Ireland's underlying problem was a superfluity of people, the potato was, thus, largely to blame. Even people who recognised that Ireland was a rich and fertile country tended to regard the potato as an impediment to its full exploitation. Such critics rarely noted that Ireland, in fact, already produced vast quantities of other foods - or that these usually ended up on English tables.

Opponents of Malthus who had any familiarity with Ireland knew this full well, however. Michael Sadler, the radical Tory MP, who gained renown for his advocacy of children's rights, published a book in 1829 entitled *Ireland; Its Evils and Their Remedies*, in which he cogently observed that the destitution which characterised rural Ireland could hardly be blamed on the potato or on excess population, since Irish poverty and famine had existed long before the potato became a major food crop and before Irish population had begun appreciably to rise. But, Sadler was clear that Ireland suffered from the dogmatic and questionable assumption that its distresses were largely due to a superfluous population which was increasing faster than the means of subsistence, because of the universal use of the potato (1829:2).

The view that Ireland's population was dramatically increasing had only developed in the late eighteenth century. But, in the first half of the 1700's, Ireland's population was scarcely excessive --indeed, in 1731, it was actually argued that Ireland's prosperity depended upon more, rather than fewer, people. Yet, the crop failure and famine of 1740 was, in demographic terms, as catastrophic as that of the 1840's (Kennedy 1973). The principal problem, then as later, was not that Ireland produced only potatoes, but that most of what else it produced was largely exported to Britain. As Sadler observed,

Ireland, instead of not producing sufficient for the sustenance of its inhabitants, produces far more than they ever consume, exporting a greater quantity of its edible products than probably any other country of equal extent in the whole world (1829:9).

This was the result of the loss by the indigenous Irish of possession of or control over their own lands, a process which had developed steadily and purposefully since the Tudor period. It had first been noted by Sir William Petty, widely regarded as the founder of classical English bourgeois political economy, who had written in the seventeenth century of how

a great part of the estates, both real and personal, in Ireland, are owned by absentees, and such as draw over the profits raised out of Ireland.

refunding nothing: so as Ireland, exporting more than it imports, doth yet grow poorer to a paradox.

Up to the last quarter of the eighteenth century, a major cause of the immiseration of the rural Irish was the systematic underutilisation of agricultural resources, largely due to the production of cattle for the provisions trade. Thus, in 1727, Hugh Boulter, the Lord Primate of Ireland, had written to the Archbishop of Canterbury:

Our present tillage falls very short of answering the demands of this nation...the occasion of this evil is, that many persons have hired large tracts of land, on to 3 or 4000 acres, and have stocked them with cattle, and have no other inhabitants on their land than so many cottiers as are necessary to look after their sheep and black cattle; so that in some of the finest counties, in many places there is neither house nor corn field to be seen in 10 or 15 miles travelling (Boulter 1769-70:221-222).

A century later, the situation had dramatically deteriorated. By then, Irish population had indeed risen, but not because the rural Irish were impelled by an irrational desire to immiserate themselves by an excessive love for children or potatoes. Far more mundane material factors were at work, chief among them the increasing commercialisation of agriculture. This, in turn, was related to the course of industrial development in England. The need in England for cheap grain for a burgeoning urban, industrial population had already led, in 1784, to the passage of Foster's Corn Law which lifted previous restrictions on the import of Irish cereals (Hechter 1975:85). Land use shifted from pasture to tillage (Hechter 1975:85); and it is estimated that in the dozen years after this bill, "more corn [i.e., grain], meal, and flour were sent out of Ireland than had been exported in the entire period from 1700 to 1784." (Green 1956:98). Demand continued to grow, especially after 1793, when the Napoleonic Wars cut off England's continental sources. By the war's end, the high price and general scarcity of grain were widely implicated in growing working-class protest against the injustices of the new industrial system. Under such conditions, it was inevitable that Ireland came to be seen as a useful source of bread. Thus, cattle began to give way to grain. Between 1805 and 1825, Irish exports of oats and oatmeal increased eightfold (Greene 1956). This increasingly intensive regime demanded more labour.

There was another important aspect of the industrialisation process which has long been overlooked, which also led rural families in Ireland, under increasing economic stress, to increase fertility in order to improve their precarious subsistence opportunities. Industrialisation of the cotton textile industry in England was the pivotal development in late eighteenth century English capitalism. It displaced wool, which had been severely limited in terms of the domestic supply of raw fibre, with a material which could be provided in virtually unlimited quantity by newly colonised tropical and semi-tropical regions. But, production was crucially limited by a major technical constraint: that cotton textiles could not initially be machine-produced with a warp strong enough to manufacture an all-cotton cloth. English

machine-woven cotton depended on supplies of Irish linen yarn to produce a material known as "fustian." In many parts of Ireland, flax raising and linen yarn production became a major cottage industry in response to the English market, and it is estimated that Ireland exported almost 47 million yards of linen by 1796, most of it wheel-spun (Horner 1920:312).

This was especially the case in the poor western province of Connacht, where both flax growing and the spinning of linen yarn were both attractive to land-hungry peasants whose subsistence base was contracting while dependence on the potato was increasing. Flax, moreover, combined readily with potato production on small holdings, and seemed even to grow especially well on land previously used to raise potatoes (Gill 1925:36n). Stephenson noted in his *Journal of a Tour of Inspection* in 1755 that "Every potato garden in the kingdom is fitter to produce flax than any ground whatever." (quoted in Gill 1925:36n) Thus, the English market for yarn was another major stimulus to potato cultivation during this period.

From the peasant's viewpoint, then, the advantages of flax were varied. According to Gill,

A flax crop yielded on the whole a larger return from a given area than any other crop which a peasant could grow, and, secondly...the careful hand-labour needed in its harvesting made it particularly valuable for very small holdings. Further, the preparation of yarn, although it was ill-paid labour, brought at any rate some increase to the trifling income of the cottier's household. In certain parts of the country flax crops were the more attractive because they were exempted by custom from tithe. Moreover, it was found that flax could be grown satisfactorily after potatoes --which were also exempted from tithe-- and thus a small farmer...could use a flax crop in establishing a simple rotation (1925:35-36).

Flax and linen yarn production also markedly enhanced the labour value of children, and the increased value of spinning among young women probably was implicated in the rate and earlier age of marriage during this period. Thus, it is unlikely to have been a coincidence either that the period during which Irish population rose most dramatically was precisely when the country's linen exports more than trebled (Gill 1925:163), or that the centre of flax production was Connacht, the province where, according to Connell, "women married earliest" and "parcellation of the land was most acute." (1965:429)

## **5. Clearances and "Overpopulation"**

In such regions, to consolidate their possession of good arable land, landlords were also pushing peasants onto poorer lands where only the potato could at first be cultivated. The potato was being deliberately used to bring otherwise useless land into cultivation, to increase the resource base available for rentable tenancies on which potatoes would eventually give way to commercial crops.



Under these circumstances, concern among landlords in Ireland about rising population only emerged after the Wars. In 1815, when hostilities ended and the boom market in grain collapsed --although grain exports to England continued to rise (Green 1956)-- and landowners sought to reestablish the earlier pattern of extensive cattle raising, only then did landlords take up the Malthusian cause as a matter of convenience. In the words of James O'Rourke, they "began to utter bitter complaints of surplus population...[and] began to ventilate their grievances through the English and Irish press, saying that their land was overrun by cottiers and squatters --the main cause of all this being kept in the background" (1902:46), that is, the clearance of the Irish countryside.

In retrospect, it is easy to see how the Malthusian argument inverted cause and effect, since most of the evidence of a Malthusian "surplus" of people was the product of a *policy* which displaced people. As evicted and homeless tenants poured into the towns and cities such as Dublin, they seemed like all the evidence one required of an over-populated land.

While many people found it tempting to blame this on the fertility-enhancing qualities of the potato, just as others in England had regarded the Poor Laws, which Malthus had argued merely loosened any constraints on working class fecundity, there were others who fully understood how English colonialism had affected the course of Irish development.

In his testimony to a Parliamentary committee in 1881, Andrew Kettle, a farmer in County Dublin, who had grown up during the Famine of the 1840's, had commented:

To begin at the beginning, I would say that because it became profitable for the landlords to get rid of the people, and to let their land in large tracts to graziers, owing to the great price paid for the article of fresh meat in England; and in that way, owing to the nature of their tenures, the people looked upon themselves as insecure. I might push that point further, and say, that it had the effect of with-drawing so much land from the Irish people as to leave undue competition for the remainder of the lands, near the Cities and towns and centres of population, into which the people had to go...I remember to have seen whole groups of homeless people coming into Dublin from the districts around; and in County Meath I saw the remains of many houses in districts that were depopulated.

Thus, while the area around Dublin seemed to swarm with an excess population, those people had, in fact, been forced to leave large parts of the country because landlords no longer wanted them on land which would otherwise have been capable of supporting them. As the Halls wrote of the clearing of the fertile lands of Meath:

The county... is the great grazing ground of Ireland, and consists almost entirely of pastureland, vying in its external aspect with the richest of the English counties, and, perhaps, surpassing any of them in fertility...Much of the apparently prosperous character is, however, hollow and insubstantial; the large farmers are indeed wealthy, but of small farmers

there are few or none: the policy of the “graziers” has been, for a long time, to devote the produce of their soil to the raising of cattle; and the “clearing of estates” in Meath has, therefore, been proceeding at a very disastrous rate...The small plots of ground are “wanted for cattle”; and as the cabins cannot exist without them, they are in rapid course of removal.

Such clearances had already created great insecurity in the decades before the Great Famine. In 1831, even without blight, there had been serious crop failure. Usually, it was only the potato that failed, but in general this was the only food which the rural poor ate. They could scarcely afford to buy or to eat anything else, even if they produced it themselves. Nor did the Irish cottiers have any power to keep other foods at home, especially in bad times when they had to be used to pay the rent, taxes and tithes, and were then usually exported to Britain. Thus, as Archbishop John MacHale wrote at the time:

It is not to the scarcity of provisions alone that the present want is owing. No; while I am writing this letter, the town of Ballina, in which three hundred families are crying out for food, is busy with the bustle of corn traders, and the public roads are covered with the crowded conveyances of its exports. It may, then, excite your...wonder...that the people should be starving while the markets are stocked with provisions (MacHale 1888)

Three years later, when William Cobbett visited Ireland, he observed the same homeless thousands sleeping and living in the streets of Dublin that Kettle would comment on years later. An acute observer of rural life, he knew that this was not even despite, but because of the enormous under-utilised agricultural potential of the Irish environment. He wrote in his *Political Register*:

I have now been over about 180 miles in Ireland, in the several counties of Dublin, Wicklow, Kildare, Carlow, Kilkenny and Waterford. I have, in former years, been in every county of England, and across every county more than one way. I have been through the finest parts of Scotland. I have lived in the finest parts of the United States of America. And here I am to declare to all the world, that I never passed over any 50 miles, in my life, any unbroken miles, of land so on average during the whole way, as the average of these 180 miles...and yet here are these starving people! And this is only because they have *no law* to give the their due share of the fruits of their labour! (Cobbett 1984:93)

He noted how the town of Clonmell, capital of County Tipperary, annually killed and salted and shipped to England 60,000 hogs, while those who raised them lived on the poor-quality potatoes called “lumpers” which were not even, in his estimation, good enough to feed pigs. Clonmel also exported around 100,000 quarters of wheat and even more of oats.

Such figures underscored the absurdity of any claims that Ireland was a resource-poor country inherently incapable of feeding its own people, and Cobbett felt called upon to observe that, since Union, there had been three major famines during which Irish output had not diminished. On the contrary,

What did we behold? Hundreds of thousands of living hogs, thousands upon thousands of sheep and oxen alive; thousands upon thousands of barrels of beef, pork, and butter; thousands upon thousands of sides of bacon, and thousands upon thousands of hams; ship-loads and boats coming daily and hourly from Ireland to feed the west of Scotland; to feed a million and a half people in the West Riding of Yorkshire, and in Lancashire; to feed London and its vicinity, and to fill the country shops in the southern counties of England; we beheld this, while famine raged in Ireland amongst the raisers of this very food (Cobbett 1984:272).

Repeated often enough, however, the opinion that Ireland could not feed its own population effectively obscured the contradictions of Ireland's colonial status and the fact that Ireland was primarily intended to serve the food needs of England. So, in Tipperary, which "contained some of the finest agricultural land in Ireland" (Beames 1983:265), a poor inquiry commissioner observed, in the early 1830's, that "the general feeling among farmers is not to break up pastures, but to get their land by degrees into grass on account of the low price of corn." (quoted in Beames 1983:265). This was a major underlying cause of the pattern of assassination that had become an important form of peasant resistance there (Beames 1983). As a result, a decade later, on the eve of the Famine, Foster observed that "The county of Tipperary has long possessed the notoriety of being a focus of outrage and disorder." The reason was clear. As he noted, "You have here the richest land and the most extreme poverty," a contradiction that was immediately comprehensible if one understood how grazing interests had claimed the resources that once had been devoted to subsistence cultivation (Foster 1846:330).

Malthusian logic denied these economic pressures and their consequences. Thus, it not only served in a general way to rationalise Irish underdevelopment, but helped, as an ideological tool of English domination, to discount the concrete origins of Irish resistance, which was reduced to little more than the disorderly conduct of a people so degraded by the poverty which they had inflicted on themselves that they amounted to little more than "human swinery," in Thomas Carlyle's phrase (1882:201). Such resistance was bitterly regarded by English politicians and intellectuals who saw it as an affront to the civilising effects of colonialism. As a result, the English government's response to rural unrest in a time of great distress was not to remove the sources of distress, but to introduce a coercion bill. The historian, Thomas Babington Macaulay, MP for Leeds and staunch defender of the Reverend Malthus, who spoke in favour of the bill, was typical in seeing "In Ireland...the spirit of Jacobinism at work, and an immediate threat to the social order, there and in England." (Clive 1973:232). When cholera hit famine-stricken Ireland in 1833, he wrote "that he preferred the cholera to the moral pestilence now raging in Ireland." (Clive 1973:231) Such opinions were but a dress rehearsal for the great famine a decade later.

In the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars, as a wave of clearances increased the pressure for pastoralist production, rural Ireland had become a place of growing conflict, which came to a

head in the decade immediately preceding the Great Famine (Beames 1983). With memories of the insurrectionary spirit of the United Irishmen still fresh, the English had taken this seriously enough to impose a constabulary, but with little effect. Another option consisted of projects to get the Irish to emigrate and here it was not only Malthusian logic, but Malthus himself, which was enlisted in their support. Testifying before Wilmot-Horton's Parliamentary Select Committee on Emigration in 1827, Malthus had been asked about Ireland's economic prospects. He replied "that it has very great capabilities, that it might be a very rich and a very prosperous country, and that it might be richer in proportion than England from its greater natural capabilities." When asked if this future prosperity would be more likely to develop if "a judicious system of emigration [was] put into force," he responded affirmatively (Horton Committee 1827:549), although he clearly regarded it, not as a solution for Irish poverty in itself, but as an adjunct to a process of agricultural modernisation along English lines (Ghosh 1963:49)--which presumably meant consolidation and clearances.

In lending his support publicly to a general policy of Irish emigration (questioning only the expenses it would impose on the state) (Ghosh 1963:49ff.), Malthus demonstrated how the "principle of population" could be deployed in a pragmatic and opportunistic way to serve specific national and class interests. In this case, the Irish had to leave their homeland, not because it was resource-poor, but because its resources were actually so attractive to the English. In other words, it was only resource-poor for the Irish who were regarded as too backward to use them productively. But, it was important, then, for the Irish to be regarded as redundant, even if, as Michael Sadler suggested a decade later, an ordinary, rational person "Would think about preventing the undue emigration of corn, cattle, and pigs, rather than of promoting that of the people." (Sadler 1842:71).

In the end, however, emigration schemes and constables proved incapable of countering the endemic impact of colonial rule, and it took a famine to accomplish what no governmental policy or intervention could do: to clear Ireland of two million people within five years.

## 6. The Making of The Great Famine

In 1845, most of Western Europe was hit by *Phytophthora*. As Pfister writes,

The ravages of the disease on the 1845 potato crop combined with a poor grain harvest caused great distress in western and central Europe. A mild winter allowed disease-infected tubers which had been discarded in the fields during the 1845 harvest to survive and to carry over the infection on a large scale to the following year's crop (1990:282).

The general agrarian stress, to which the widespread failure of potato crops contributed, was one of a number of factors that set off the riots, rebellions and revolutions which swept across Europe in 1848.

But, events in Ireland differed dramatically from developments elsewhere, where, at least, widespread starvation was generally forestalled. In the Swiss canton of Bern, for example, when a food riot broke out in October, 1846, the reaction of the cantonal government was to acquire food grains from abroad to prevent wholesale food shortages (Pfister 1990:283). The contrast between this response and England's reaction to pending famine in Ireland was due to the fact that Bern was in command of its own affairs, while Ireland's fate depended on the interests of a colonial power. Indeed, many of the leading figures in the British cabinet at the time --including Lord Palmerston, the Foreign Secretary and Lord Clarendon, President of the Board of Trade and Lord Lieutenant of Ireland-- were absentee Anglo-Irish landlords (Ridley 1970:2-4, 321; Prest 1972:237; Stephen and Lee 1921-22, Vol.20:347-350). And if they were not, their families often were: the Duke of Bedford, the brother of the Prime Minister, Lord John Russell, also owned substantial estates in Ireland (Prest 1972:238).

Travelling through Ireland late in 1845, as the first potatoes were beginning to blacken in the fields, Thomas Foster wrote that he was "certain that some steps will be required to be taken to avert the horrors of a famine." (1846:328-329) But, those measures were never taken. The English government, not surprisingly, generally acted as if it regarded the famine as the only effective means of repressing the rebellion that was then rampant throughout rural Ireland. Russell, moreover, was especially possessed of "a Malthusian fear about the long-term effect of relief," while Clarendon believed that "doling out food merely to keep people alive would do nobody any permanent good." (Prest 1972:271) Except, of course, those whom such callousness ultimately condemned to death.

The relief programme, such as it was, was in the hands of Charles Trevelyan, who had been educated at the East India College at Haileybury while Malthus was professor there (Steven and Lee 1921-22, Vol. 12:886-87; Vol. 19:1135). His wife was the sister of Macaulay, whose fervent Malthusianism (Trevelyan 1978:116) had led him to challenge Sadler for a parliamentary seat, because of the latter's anti-Malthusian views. Trevelyan's own forceful Malthusian attitudes were clearly reflected in his opinion that the famine was "a direct stroke of an all-wise and all-merciful Providence." (Trevelyan 1848:201) His justification for meagre assistance for the Irish was that

posterity will trace up to that Famine the commencement of a salutary revolution in the habits of a nation long singularly unfortunate, and will acknowledge that on this as on many other occasions, Supreme Wisdom had educed permanent good out of transient evil (Trevelyan 1848:1).

A year earlier, the Bishop of New York had already offered a pointed critique of this view, when he had written:

...they call it God's famine! No! no! God's famine is known by the general scarcity of food, of which it is the consequence; there is no general scarcity, there has been no general scarcity of food in Ireland, either the present, or the past year, except in one species of vegetable. The soil has produced its usual tribute for the support of those by whom it has been cultivated; but political economy found the Irish people too poor to pay for the harvest of their own labour, and has exported it to a better market, leaving them to die of famine, or to live on alms; and this same political economy authorizes the provision merchant, even amidst the desolation, to keep his doors locked, and his sacks of corn tied up within, waiting for a better price (Hughes 1847:21).

The argument that the Famine was a divine blessing which would rectify a Malthusian imbalance between people and resources undoubtedly appealed to a British cabinet dominated by Irish absentee landlords. To the extent that it justified the barest minimum of relief, the argument that nature must be allowed to take its course also meant that aid would not confound the workings of the "market." As a result, one of the most perverse feature of the famine years was that Irish exports --the reason that the island was a colony-- were not only maintained throughout the crisis, but actually *increased*. In 1846 alone, almost half a million pigs were shipped to England --pigs that in a good year might have been eaten but now had to pay the rent (O'Donovan 1940:192). Even the *London Times*, which had little visible sympathy for the Irish, conceded that,

while England was avowedly feeding Ireland...whole fleets of provisions were continually arriving from the land of starvation to the ports of wealth and the cities of abundance (London Times1880:45).

Most people in England were unaware of this, however. For them, the famine was simply a dramatic sign of how catastrophically the Irish had managed their resources and of their failure to diversify their diet. As a letter-writer to the *Times* remarked:

they inhabit a country a great part of which is at least equal in fertility to our own, with more that is capable of being made so. There is no reason, *except their own willful mismanagement*, why they should not grow as fine crops of wheat as are raised in the Lothians, and, after feeding themselves, export the surplus to our shores (London Times 1880:14, my italics).

The real problem was that the food that Ireland was already exporting to England in such prodigious quantities was *not* surplus.

## 7. The Aftermath of the Famine: The Clearances Continue

Despite massive depopulation --over two million people died or emigrated due to the Famine (O'Grada 1972:154)-- and in spite of increasingly delayed marriage, the "permanent good" to which Trevelyan alluded never materialised, because the real problem of Ireland, English colonialism, had not gone away. And, far from leaving Ireland's future to god's will, Westminster quickly took advantage of the Famine to enact bills<sup>2</sup> which actually accelerated the very process of land concentration and eviction that had put rural Ireland at such peril in the first place (Kennedy 1973:28-29). As Jones observes:

The market in evicted land was especially brisk during the famine and its immediate aftermath...The wholesale clearances of the late 1840s and early 1850s allowed commercially ambitious individuals to acquire pasture ground at relatively cheap rates. On many estates the evicted land formerly held by subsistence tenants was consolidated into large pastoral holdings and relet to graziers and other men of capital (1983:392).

Between 1845 and 1851, the number of plots of less than one acre fell from 135,000 to 38,000, while those between 1 and 15 acres declined from 493,000 to 280,000 (Steele 1974:3). Between 1841 and 1901, the percentage of all holdings between one and five acres fell from 45 to 12, but the proportion of those 30 and above rose from 7 to 32 (Kennedy 1973:89). According to Steele, by the 1870's,

half the country belonged to a thousand people with an average of around 10,000 acres each. Great and small, the landlords were, as a body, British, or Anglo-Irish, and Protestant (1974:3).

For decades, the main source of pressure on the small-scale Irish cultivator remained precisely what it had been in the years preceding the famine, the expansion of pasturage, only now it occurred with an unprecedented intensity. The proportion of Irish agricultural land being cultivated declined from one-third in 1851, in the immediate wake of the Great Famine, to less than one-fifth in 1881. It had fallen to one-seventh by 1926 (Kennedy 1973:91-92), at the time of partition. All this was to meet a growing demand for beef in Britain, which was reflected in the dramatic price differentials between grain and meat that characterised the post-Famine period:

From a low point in 1850, the last Famine year, the prices of cattle at the Ballinasloe October fair, the "greatest" fair in the west of Ireland, doubled by 1855 and then continued to rise steadily at an average of 2 pounds per

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<sup>2</sup> One of the most notable of these measures was the so-called "Gregory clause" to the Poor Law Amendment Act of June, 1847, which was named after William Gregory, the MP from Cork who introduced it. This provision prevented anyone with more than a quarter acre of land from being considered destitute and thus able to qualify for poor relief. Since many Poor Law guardians, who were responsible for administering local relief, were also landlords, it was inevitable that this measure was exploited to facilitate land clearances (Donnelly 1975:98).

year until 1880...In contrast, grain prices fluctuated wildly after the Famine, wheat prices being 21 per cent lower nationally in 1876 than in 1840 (Jordan 1987:326)

Irish exports of cattle rose from almost 202,000 in 1846-49 to about 558,000 by 1870-74 (O'Donovan 1940), a development that was facilitated by the establishment of the Irish railway network in the second half of the nineteenth century (Jones 1983:377). By 1880, it would be written that

agriculture of most other kinds has been steadily dwindling down; 519,307 acres out of a total tillage area of 5,500,000 had gone out of cultivation in ten years. The wheat culture was ruined...The breadth of land even under oats had declined by 320,000 acres...50.2 percent of the entire surface area of the country and two-thirds of its wealth were devoted to the raising of cattle (Dublin Mansion House Relief Committee 1881:2).

In the province of Connacht alone, total crop acreage declined from 744,263 in 1869 to 694,708 a decade later, while land in meadow and clover --a sign of grazing-- soared by thirty percent from 200,766 to 262,095 acres (House of Commons 1880c:848-849). By then, cattle and sheep graziers, who occupied almost half the land of Ireland, were the dominant political force in the country (Crotty 1981:111-113).

One of the worst hit parts of Connacht was County Mayo, where the post-Famine increase in pasture had been especially rapid. According to Jordan,

Between 1847, the first year for which reliable are available, and 1851 the number of cattle in Mayo rose from 79,148 to 116,930. There were 173,596 cattle in 1876 and 191,497 in 1900, representing an increase of 142 per cent over the fifty-three years. The number of sheep rose 225 per cent over the same years. In order to graze this livestock the amount of land in Mayo devoted to grass, meadow and clover increased from 485,651 statute acres in 1851, or 38.8 per cent of the total acreage of the county, to 595,843 acres, or 44.9 per cent of the total, in 1900 (Jordan 1987:327).

Because much of this expansion involved the conversion of cropland and a process of land consolidation, typically effected through evictions, the result was that many subsistence cultivators in the most fertile regions of the county were forced either to relocate in peripheral areas or to emigrate (Jordan 1987:327-330).

As early as the 1860's, a Poor Law Inspector reported from Mayo that

Amongst the small farmers or occupiers of land, [deprivation] is everywhere in the barony severe; but in the electoral districts, already alluded to, I am convinced it is intense. Many families there are, I believe, utterly without means. The whole of their stock of potatoes and corn is gone; it has barely sufficed for their own support up to the present time, and been inadequate for that of their cattle, which have died of starvation and cold. Such families are now without means of supporting themselves



or cultivating their farms. They find that if they surrender them, and go into the workhouses, they become paupers for life; and, in most cases, they will die sooner than adopt such a course (quoted in Day 1862:37).

By 1870, the expansion of cattle and sheep grazing had considerably worsened conditions for small-holders and rural labourers. In Mayo, where as few as nine land-owners owned over one-third of the land and most were disinclined to rent their land to anyone but large graziers (Jones 1973:395), families which still depended on potato cultivation were under increasing pressure (Jordan 1987:334; cf. Crotty 1981:111; Jordan 1987). As cattle and sheep pushed tillage onto worse soils, not only did total crop acreage decline, but productivity fell as well.

## **8. The Crisis of 1879: Famine and Protest**

The pattern of increasing land monopolisation and the expansion of grazing which spurred it were only a part of the problem, however. By the late 1870s, a great agricultural crisis had embraced much of Western Europe and severely affected the British Isles. In large part, this was due to horrendous weather, which made European agriculture extremely vulnerable to new developments in the international market. As Lamb has noted,

The decline of English agriculture, which lasted for fifty years, dated from this time. The harvests had been affected by difficult seasons from 1875, and the competition on Britain's free trade market of cheap North American meat from the prairies was beginning to be felt. 1879 turned the decline into a collapse (Lamb 1982:245).

The situation in Ireland was especially grim for the near-landless who depended on the potato. As Solow observes,

During the month of March 1877, when Irish farmers were preparing to till their soil and plant their crops, it rained for twenty days. Then it rained for twenty-four days in April. In August when the crops should have been approaching maturity for the harvest, it rained for twenty seven days. With the exception of one crop (hay), the harvest was disastrous. The yield of every other crop fell, and potatoes suffered particularly, declining from an average yield per acre of 4.7 tons in 1876 to 2.0 tons in 1877 (1971:121).

There was a slight, patchy recovery in 1878, but conditions worsened the following year. According to Solow,

It is almost impossible for the imagination to devise a worse combination of weather conditions than befell the Irish in 1879. Not only was the mean temperature of every month from January to September inclusive, considerably below the average of the preceding ten years, but it was in July and August that the cold was most unusual...Not only did the rainfall far exceed the average, but the four months of greatest excess included June, July, and August. For June and July the rainfall was more than 100

percent above the average of the past ten years. Crops yields plummeted. The potato yield fell to 1.3 tons for all Ireland, half a ton below the last recorded *famine* year (1872) (Solow 1971:122).

One of the normal safety-valves in times of rural distress, seasonal employment in England (Kerr 1943; Green 1956:116; Johnson 1970:236-238), was limited now by the general agricultural depression and by increasing mechanisation (Royal Commission on Agriculture 1881:668), which had significantly reduced English farmers' demand for Irish labour. At the same time, imports of cheap and abundant grain and meat from the United States, whose vast interior plains were being opened up by new advances in long-distance transport (Royal Commission on Agriculture 1881:*passim*; Ross 1980:198-204)-- were not only filling the vacuum created by crop failures throughout Europe (Solow 1971:122-123), but undercutting local prices. The price of Irish ham in Ireland was actually three pence higher than that of imported U.S. ham (*Sligo Independent* 1879:3). It is little wonder that 1878 was regarded by some as the least profitable for the agricultural economy of Ireland for thirty years (Moody 1981:273).

As a result, many small and moderate sized farmers and cottiers were in debt to merchants and landlords (Moody 1981:283) and, as few landlords were prepared to countenance non-payment of rent, the number of "ejectments" rose, nationally, from 1,749 in 1878 to 2,677 in 1879 --an increase of 53 percent in one year. The growing tide of anger and frustration which had been accumulating since the late 1860's began to be expressed in new forms of rural protest by the end of the 1870's.

In this regard, Connacht, which was the most deprived region of the country, took the lead with 56 percent of all the so-called "agrarian offences" registered by the constabulary during 1879 and the first month of 1880. Of the 544 cases reported for that province alone, 36 percent occurred in Mayo --one of the counties hardest hit by evictions-- although it only contained 29 percent of the province's population (House of Commons 1880d:286-287, 349; House of Commons 1880c:849). It was Mayo that was the home of the land agent for the Earl of Erne, Captain Charles Boycott, who gave his name to the mass resistance -- "boycotting"-- which he encountered when he attempted to evict his employer's tenants (Ellis 1972:160; Marlow 1973:13; Taatgen 1992:170). And it was in Mayo that growing popular resistance gave birth to one of the most potent challenges yet raised against English rule in Ireland, the Land League, with its call for land reform. The challenge was perhaps the greater because, as Crotty has observed, although the majority of participants in the League were small-scale cultivators and rural labourers, one of its guiding forces was actually the graziers themselves, who no longer wanted to put up with "the sharing of profits from the booming livestock trade with an Anglo-Irish Protestant elite whose title to that share rested on the increasingly anachronistic grounds of conquest, confiscation and royal munificence in an

increasingly distant and irrelevant past.” (Crotty 1981:111) To that extent, the League brought into question the very basis of English hegemony.

### **9. Underdevelopment, Agrarian Crisis and Miracles**

Another feature of this period of unprecedented rural stress and social conflict was the vision of the Virgin Mary and Saints John and Joseph which was reported from the small village of Knock in a remote part of county Mayo, in mid-August, 1878 (Carroll 1986:202-211; Purcell 1961). Debate over whether the apparition which was reported by many villagers as floating on the gable wall of the local church sacristy was the collective illusion of devoted believers (cf. Carroll 1985:59), overlooks the extraordinary timing of the event. The stress to which the population of this region was subject after successive years of poor harvests begins to explain why local people were fertile ground for such a religious experience. To that extent, the vision at Knock was less an expression of Irish character than another symptom of the crisis of the late 1870's. But, that is only part of the picture.

Crawford has shown that American Indian or maize meal had begun to play a role in the diet of rural Ireland in times of hunger since the early part of the century. From then on, there was a steady, if fluctuating upward trend in imports of maize meal from the United States, with marked upsurges in periods of acute shortages. One reason was that, though imported, it was more affordable even than Irish oatmeal (Crawford 1981:113-119). As a result, by the 1860's, many poorer families were already routinely dependent on maize meal, both to supplement their regular diet and to substitute for potatoes when the latter failed.

For the peasant, the use of maize meal in such circumstances was a question of necessity, particularly in the western districts. But, maize was hardly an adequate nutritional substitute for potatoes, which were also a crop of American origin (Salaman 1985). The role which the potato had increasingly assumed in rural Ireland over time had not been without its problems, but there is no doubt that, except during years when the potato crop failed, it provided nutritional security in the face of what would otherwise have been endemic scarcity. The reason for this was that the potato was extremely productive of calories per acre and was a notable source of minerals and many vitamins (Paul and Southgate 1978:180; Lapedes 1977:519). As a result, a diet of potatoes --especially when supplemented by milk-- afforded protection against many deficiency diseases.

Among these was pellagra, the scourge of many European peasant communities which, from the sixteenth century on, had become heavily dependent on maize. This was particularly the case, for example, in the Lombardy plain of Italy, southern France along the Pyrennes and in northern Spain, including the province of Asturias (Roe 1973:30). A disease of complex

etiology (Weiner and Van Eys 1983) and varied symptomology, pellagra's general clinical pattern was first described in print in 1762 by Gaspar Casal, a Spanish physician who lived in Asturias (Lopez Ibor 1975:112; Garrison 1929:367).

Today, pellagra is recognised as being the result of a deficiency of either the vitamin, nicotinic acid (niacin), or the amino acid, tryptophan, which is its metabolic precursor. But, nicotinic acid was not identified until 1867 and pellagra itself was not discovered to be the result of a vitamin deficiency until over half a century later, through the research of Joseph Goldberger and his associates at the U.S. Public Health Service (Terris 1964; Weiner and Van Eys 1983:viii-ix). But, even then, it was not definitively associated with niacin or nicotinic acid until 1937 or with tryptophan until almost a decade later (Horwitt 1973:198).

In the New World, where maize was first domesticated, pellagra was rare because, although it is low in tryptophan and contains niacin in a relatively inaccessible form, maize was typically consumed along with a legume which did contain tryptophan (Weiner and Van Eys 1983:8). In addition, it was usually prepared with an alkali such as lime which helped release enough of its bound niacin to further enhance its nutritional value (Katz et al. 1974; Weiner and Van Eys 1983:9-10). But, when maize was transplanted to Europe in the late sixteenth century, such practices were not brought over as well. In the poorer parts of rural Europe where it became a staple food (Blum 1978), what we now recognise as pellagra soon became prominent, acquiring a variety of local folk names.

Among the first symptoms of the illness were an erythematous dermatitis (often precipitated by sunshine in the spring), gastro-intestinal disturbances, and some central and peripheral nervous system changes, evidenced in mental confusion and hysteria (Roe 1973:3; McLaren 1972:120; Davidson et al. 1973:293; Scrimshaw 1971:1688). In its early stage, pellagra is therefore a disease with a variety of relatively non-specific features which complicate diagnosis. As a result, many of its victims historically have tended to be categorised by their psychological symptoms as witches or as mentally insane (Pelicier 1975; Lopez Ibor 1975:104; Ackerknecht 1968:18-19).

Pellagra has tended to be a matter of concern or attention primarily in areas of endemic occurrence; as a result, as late as 1879, virtually all of the scientific work on the subject was confined to countries where it was prevalent --especially Italy, where it had acquired its modern name in 1771, in a monograph by the Milanese doctor, Francisco Frapoli (Roe 1973:37). By comparison, little notice of it was taken in northern Europe. Thus, Charles Weld, an English traveller in southern France in the late eighteen-fifties, actually described "pellagre" as "a fatal disease occasioned by malaria and bad water." (Weld 1859:30) But, even where it was prevalent, its origins remained obscure. By the second half of the nineteenth century it still had not yet been demonstrated that peasants in different regions of

Europe were suffering from the same, clinically identical syndrome (Roe 1973:35). All that anyone really knew was that pellagra was associated with maize-cultivating regions, but a toxic agent in diseased maize was suspected (Berger 1893:350).

By the late 1870's, however, imported maize meal had become a regular constituent of the rural Irish diet and was often the principal, if not the sole food of many families in western counties during times of extreme stress. By the later summer of 1879, after several years of poor harvests, potato reserves were low and another bad harvest seemed imminent. Crawford has noted that, nutritionally, conditions in counties such as Mayo, were "particularly conducive to pellagra." (Crawford 1981:128).

Between 1870-74 and 1875-79, average annual imports of Indian corn and meal into Ireland rose dramatically, from 5.1 to 8.2 million hundredweights. Mayo in particular received large supplies (Crawford 1981:115, 131) which were frequently distributed through local merchants. In the town of Castlebar alone, 18,000 pounds worth of Indian meal was obtained on credit (Bew 1978:57). Considerable quantities also reached people in the form of relief aid under the auspices of various charitable organisations or through local Poor Law Committees. In the vicinity of the village of Knock, where evictions ran at a high rate (Purcell 1961:148), contemporary accounts suggest that many people would have starved without such charity (Morant 1880:196; Coyne 1953:73). Years later, a resident of Knock reminisced: "How well I remember that historic year, 1879 --the potato blight and the ensuing famine, the Indian meal dole, otherwise called 'the committee meal.'" (Coyne 1953:71)

By the summer, 1880, when many in the West had been reduced to a diet of maize meal (House of Commons 1880a:271-278), it had become clear that its effect was not entirely salutary. One medical inspector wrote of how

In almost all the cases of fever the staple article of food was Indian meal made into stirabout; none of them had potatoes; very few were able to get flour or bread. The Indian meal was always cooked in the same way, and about half of the people had to eat it without milk (House of Commons 1880a:264).

Such circumstances were very likely to give rise to early symptoms of pellagra. While few observers would even have considered looking for it, there is evidence from a number of physicians that the fever cases they attended were not typical "famine fever," but something which "originated from insufficiency of diet and want of change of nutrient." (Royal Commission on Agriculture 1881:663) One doctor, George Sigerson, voiced his suspicions in a report on destitution diseases in western Ireland, when he referred to "the pellagra disease" in poor parts of Italy and Spain and its association with a diet of Indian meal (1880:165-166).

The standard, indeed one of the most obvious, clinical signs of pellagra (Sandstead 1973:597) -- a rash where the skin has been exposed to sunlight-- would never have been common in Ireland, especially during the cold and cloudy weather with which the region was troubled in 1879 (Sturge 1890:79ff.). One of the other notable features of pellagra, but one of the most difficult to identify, is its effect on its victims' mental state. As the nutritionist, Nevin Scrimshaw, has noted, "The non-specific psychic and emotional changes of early pellagra may, with increasing severity, progress to disorientation, delirium, and hallucination." (Scrimshaw 1971:1443) By 1879, such tendencies would have made many of the inhabitants of the poorest communities in western Ireland particularly susceptible to additional stress or unusual stimulation.

It is perhaps not surprising, then, that the Knock vision seems to have been triggered by the schedule of religious celebrations that took place in late summer. The apparition was first reported in the immediate aftermath of the Feast of the Assumption of the Virgin on the fifteenth of August, on the evening before it was to be celebrated again on the occasion of the "octave," the last day of the eight-day period of the feast. It was reported next on the morning of the Epiphany, the sixth of January (MacPhilpin 1880). On both occasions, there was obviously a heightened religious consciousness in the community.

But, receptivity to the idea that the Virgin and the Saints had appeared at Knock was also the result of the sense of foreboding that deteriorating environmental conditions brought. With several years of poor harvests behind them and many families recently or likely to be evicted, there was a desperate hope for improvement. But, August brought strong indications of another catastrophic year. Throughout the British Isles, the late pre-harvest summer weather, which was already bad, had worsened. In Bristol, according to meteorological accounts, there had been some rain early in August, followed by ten days with scarcely any. But, then, around the middle of the month,

Aquarius returned with redoubled energy, giving us a succession of almost tropical rains till the end of the month, accompanied in the last few days by gales of a violence rarely experienced in the summer season...The total [rain-] fall for August was 7.71 inches, being, with one exception, the heaviest recorded in any month during the twenty-four years (Sturge 1890:82).

On the 20th of August, *The Sligo Independent*, in western Ireland, published an alarming editorial, entitled "The Weather - Harvest prospects," which captured the apocalyptic mood prevailing at the time:

This week has been a disastrous one for the farmers of this country. The rain which fell in abundance, and the high wind have done an incalculable amount of mischief. On Wednesday and Thursday it was more like winter than autumn, and the storm which raged fiercely on those nights has blown about the growing crops. Large quantities of hay had been cut, and lay on the meadows exposed to the pelting rain...The late bad weather has been

very disastrous for the potato crop. Several parties have informed us that in fields which, up to Monday last, were green and promising, there is now a spread of blackness and rottenness which has extended to the tubers to an alarming extent (*The Sligo Independent* 1879:2).

This was the week that immediately preceded the apparition, which was first reported “in a blinding drizzle of rain” on the evening of 21 August (MacPhilpin 1880:14).

Many factors combined to create the vision at Knock --which was simultaneously an embodiment of local peoples’ hope and despair-- and, to that extent, there is no need to suggest that nutritional stress --in the form of pellagra-- played the major or even a necessary role. But, it is worth looking at least at one witness’s account. A visitor from a nearby community, a youth named John McClosky, described the figure of the Virgin against the wall of the sacristy and spoke of how “Every now and then a red tongue of flame used to shoot down from the heavens and cross the gable.” (MacPhilpin 1880:52) One of the psychological manifestations of pellagra is “florid confusion with perhaps hallucinations of fire.” (Shepherd 1978:1415)

More important, however, is why the vision at Knock, which easily might have remained a purely local event, was rapidly elevated to national prominence, so that the village today is home to one of the world’s major Marian shrines. Within weeks of its first report, the proprietor of the *Tuam News*, which was published in the nearby episcopal seat, was proclaiming that the village of Knock was “a second Lourdes.” (MacPhilpin 1880:7) This was perhaps a more ironic comparison than he intended, since Lourdes, where a young girl, Bernadette Soubirous, claimed to have seen the Virgin in 1858, was situated in south-west France, in the foothills of the Pyrennes (Keyes 1961:115), another notorious pellagra-prone region. Nonetheless, a Commission of Inquiry was rapidly convened by Archbishop John MacHale and soon endorsed the apparition. By March, 1880, the first organised pilgrimage was received by MacHale on its way to Knock.

## **10. Famine, the Land League and the Institutionalisation of Knock**

The speed of events reflected the corresponding acceleration of protest in the West, particularly in Mayo, where Knock was located. As Clark has observed, the rising movement against absentee landlordism had created a unity of interest in rural areas which gave the appearance of an unprecedented threat to the established order. One measure of the gravity of the crisis in Mayo was that half of the protest meetings called within Connacht at this time, to build public pressure --”agitation” in official parlance-- for land reform, were held in that one county alone (House of Commons 1880b:292). It was not by accident that Mayo gave birth to the Land League.

That movement was closely associated with the Mayo-born Michael Davitt. As a child, growing up in Lancashire, where his family had emigrated during the Great Famine, Davitt had lost an arm while working in a cotton mill. During the years, 1870-77, he had been imprisoned in Portland jail for his militant nationalist activities with the Fenians. On release, he had quickly moved to take advantage of grass-roots pressure for change in western Ireland. But, he rode on a great tide (Crotty 1981). Even while he was in prison, the forces which culminated in the Land League had been mounting, especially in Mayo where, in 1874, a leading Fenian, John O'Connor Powers, was elected to Parliament, defeating a candidate supported by the Catholic hierarchy, including the Archbishop, John MacHale.

It was worsening agricultural conditions through the summer of 1879 that really accelerated the struggle for reform. Davitt gave much coherence to the process by helping to organise an important series of meetings throughout Mayo and elsewhere in the west --gatherings whose numbers were swelled by increasing evictions and by the involvement of prominent political figures. Among these was Charles Parnell, the rising light among Irish M.P.'s at Westminster and leader of the Home Rule movement, whose place beside Davitt gave the movement for land reform a wider and more compelling prospect.

It was for that reason that clerical support was conspicuously absent. Even where it claimed an understanding of the plight of the Irish poor, the Catholic Church in Ireland stood for law and order and property. One of the aims of a large meeting which the Fenians called at Irishtown in Mayo in April, in fact, had been to express opposition to rent increases in a case where a local priest was the land agent (Clark 1971:292, 458-459). In past decades, however, the Church had largely managed to exert some control over demands for change. But, the events of 1878-79 were different, challenging the authority and influence of the Church, as well as of the old land-owning class (Clark 1979:285).

So, far from expressing sympathy, Church figures generally tended to denounce the meetings of that summer, which in turn only fuelled further expressions of popular militancy. This was amply demonstrated at Knock on the first of June, 1879, when

a monster meeting was held to protest against the language used from the altar by venerable archdeacon Cavanagh P.P. [the parish priest of Knock] the previous Sunday against farmers organising meetings to ventilate their grievances and in particular against John O'Kane of Claremorris (one of the leaders of the Irishtown affair), whom he accused of preparing the country for revolution (Moody 1981:246).

A week after the Knock meeting, a major gathering was held at Westport, at which Parnell spoke. The day before, Archbishop MacHale published a denunciation of the pending assembly in the *Freeman's Journal*, expressing sympathy with the tenants but opposing the nature of the land movement which inclined "to impiety and disorder in church and society."



(quoted in Moody 1981:303) Despite his disapproval, some 10,000 people attended the Westport rally (Ellis 1972:154), which the *Dublin Evening Mail*, epitomising the hysterical tone of the times, described as evidence of “Communism in Connaught.” (Ellis 1972:155; Marlow 1973:98) When a subsequent meeting in mid-July at Claremorris, just a few miles from Knock, attracted as many as 20,000 people who heard Davitt declare that “The soil of Ireland should be returned to the people of Ireland,” (*Mayo Examiner and West of Ireland Agricultural and Commercial Reporter and Advertizer* 1879:1), it must have seemed that the spirit of revolution was on the loose.

That spirit became incarnate on the 16th of August. On that date, the day after the Feast of the Assumption, as the likelihood of another harvest failure seemed obvious, Davitt officially proclaimed the formation of the Land League of Mayo. The vision at Knock was witnessed only five days later, when the first persons to see it were Father Cavanagh’s housekeeper and the sister of the church sacristan (Eager 1970:148; Neary 1979:2-4; Purcell 1961:152-153). Within a few weeks, it was established as a strong rival for popular attention. Soon the proprietor of the *Tuam News*, which was published in the same episcopal seat from which MacHale was directing his counter-attack on the Land League, was able to write that “the multitudes who flock to the chapel, or Catholic Church at Knock, from the surrounding districts are quite as numerous as those that formed the monster meetings which for the past nine months have been held in the counties of Mayo, Galway and Sligo.” (MacPhilpin 1880:7)

## **11. Conclusions: Modernisation and the Demise of Irish Subsistence Agriculture**

The land movement did not simply die away. In Dublin, in October, 1879, the Irish National Land League was established, consolidating regional groups from Mayo and elsewhere. But, through the following year, the religious fervour which the Knock vision stimulated “competed with the land agitation for the attention of the people.” (Clark 1979:282) It was not, however, the sole means for subduing the insurrectionary mood in the countryside and, through 1880-81, the British government prosecuted and interned many of the League’s leaders and activists. Eventually, Gladstone’s Liberal government passed the Land Act of 1881 which was designed both to blunt the movement’s principal demands and to modernise Irish agriculture. As such, however, it largely favoured the large commercial and grazing interests. As Crotty notes,

The principal distributional effect of the 1881 and subsequent land acts has been to broaden, and thereby make more durable, the proprietorship of Irish land. They hardly transformed that proprietorship. Instead of 10,000 Anglo-Irish landlords owning all the land, now some 20,000 graziers own half of it and 95 percent of the people continue to own none of it (Crotty 1981:114).

Thus, far from highlighting the extent to which Ireland's "population problem" existed only relative to the dominant mode of production which under-utilised the country's agricultural resources, the famine of 1879 --like that of the 1840's-- proved principally to be a means of reaffirming the established pattern of agrarian relations. So, the authors of a report by the Dublin Mansion House Committee, one of the chief relief agencies, were moved to write in its aftermath:

we cannot reflect without melancholy that the thirty years which have rolled by since [the Great Famine]...should find us emerging from another famine, surrounded by the same phenomena of a fruitful soil and a starving population, a war of classes, a stain of crime, and the self-same prostration of national energy attributed to the self-same causes (1881:77).

That this had occurred despite the wholesale *decline* in Irish population underscores the extent to which the role of classic Malthusian pressures within the Irish rural economy was exaggerated. Yet, the idea that Irish underdevelopment was essentially Malthusian in origin was now so pervasive --and so convenient at a time when the last vestiges of subsistence agriculture were being exorcised-- that the turbulent events of the late 1870's only served to reinvigorate the argument that Ireland was over-populated. Even as the 1881 Land Act was being passed, E. T. Wakefield, an English barrister who owned land in Ireland, wrote, in a pamphlet called *The Disaffection of Ireland: Its Cause and Its Cure*, that the physical misery which afflicted so many people in Ireland was "the direct result of over-population; that is, population beyond the available resources of the country." (Wakefield 1881:3)

Among the reasons he cited for this situation, few were new: "unfavourable climate," "unproductive soil," "early marriages," and "inaptitude for commerce." (Wakefield 1881:4) Echoing the conventional wisdom, he argued that Ireland was not destined to be peopled by small-scale cultivators, for "we know that the climatic, geological and geographical conditions of Ireland have in the main determined her to be a grass-growing, cattle-rearing country." (Wakefield 1881:7) This, of course, contrasted with the earlier "wisdom" of landlords during the Napoleonic Wars when Ireland not only had been highly regarded as a grain-producing country, but was actually considered "the granary of Great Britain." (O Grada 1972:152) It is the task of colonial enterprise to make its agenda "natural," rather than consistent. But, if Ireland was to be little more than a "cattle farm" for England, then there was little room for the Irish. The expansion of grazing over the preceding three decades had done much to prove that. But, for those who were left, Wakefield revived the suggestion that they emigrate to underpopulated parts of the British Empire (Wakefield 1881:5).

The irony is that, by the time of Wakefield's proposal, the decline of agriculture had already forced such draconian reproductive strategies on rural Irish households that age at marriage and the rate of celibacy both were on the rise, until they were among the highest in Western Europe (Kennedy 1973; O'Reilly 1986:222-223; Scheper-Hughes 1979). It was rural Ireland

that was becoming depopulated, yet, it was still being asked to populate the rest of the Empire. This, again, underlines the fact that, despite a dramatic reversal of the demographic trends to which Malthusians had ascribed the Great Famine and notwithstanding the absolute decline in Irish population, as long as Ireland remained a productive constituent of the English economy, subsistence agriculture would remain precarious and problematical. As grazing continued to expand, emigration --not as a matter of policy but of personal necessity-- became a way of life for rural Ireland. It continues to be so even now.

As with many developing countries today, this outflow of Irish population reinforces the popular view, shaped by over a century and a half of Malthusian thinking, that the country is perennially characterised by excess population. But, as we have seen, that idea has been little more than the product of Malthusian ideology applied to the imperatives of colonial rule which, in Ireland as in many other parts of the world, created an economy that has tended to export indigenous labour more than it has absorbed it. To that extent, Ireland has never really had a surplus population when viewed within the larger colonial matrix, but only relative to its own residual subsistence production. Any "surplus" population from which Ireland ostensibly suffered was not the result of Irish reproductive habits, but of livelihood and survival strategies which were imposed on Ireland by English landlords and an English Parliament, both of which steadfastly refused to accommodate Irish demands for autonomous development, and are now perpetuated by an Irish state (within the framework of the European Union) which subserves the interests of large farmers.

As a result, the only reason for the eventual decline of the Irish rural poor was that they left the country. The west of Ireland today is a land of dying communities, characterised by "celibacy, childlessness, and ageing of the Irish farm population," (Scheper-Hughes 1979:39) as the process of modernisation continues (Scheper-Hughes 1979:42-44). The consequences --and the reason-- are clear on a Sunday morning in London, when Smithfield market receives dozens of refrigerated trucks that bring beef from the Irish cattle that have replaced people.

As such, the economic and social realities of Ireland, past and present, differ little from those which characterised the landscape of early capitalist England, when peasants were cleared off land to make room for sheep, or which may be witnessed in contemporary Central America, where peasant lands are appropriated in order to graze cattle for the North American fast food market. That the environmental and social crises which characterise such regions of the Third World are commonly regarded in Malthusian terms should surprise no one --and convince no one-- who brings to an understanding of the development process a sensitivity to history and to the history of ideas.



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