



**HAL**  
open science

## The Times and the Great Irish Famine 1846-47

Christophe Gillissen

► **To cite this version:**

Christophe Gillissen. The Times and the Great Irish Famine 1846-47. Mémoire(s), identité(s), marginalité(s) dans le monde occidental contemporain. Cahiers du MIMMOC, 2015, 12, 10.4000/mimmoc.1828 . hal-02422906

**HAL Id: hal-02422906**

**<https://normandie-univ.hal.science/hal-02422906>**

Submitted on 1 Jun 2022

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



Distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution - NonCommercial - NoDerivatives 4.0 International License

# Mémoire(s), identité(s), marginalité(s) dans le monde occidental contemporain

Cahiers du MIMMOC

12 | 2015 :

The 1846-1851 Famine in Ireland: Echoes and Repercussions

---

## The Times and the Great Irish Famine 1846-47

*Le quotidien The Times de Londres et la Grande Famine 1846-1847*

CHRISTOPHE GILLISSEN

<https://doi.org/10.4000/mimmoc.1828>

---

### Résumé

Le *Times* jouissait d'une influence remarquable pendant les années 1840, et ses prises de position nombreuses sur la Grande Famine en Irlande eurent un impact indéniable sur la politique menée par le gouvernement de Lord John Russell en 1846-1847. En effet, si le quotidien était plus proche des *whigs* que des *tories*, il était avant tout opposé à toute aide financière à l'Irlande de la part du gouvernement. Il plaida pour une solution fondée sur l'assistance locale, financée par les propriétaires irlandais. Un recueil d'articles datant de 1846-1847 et publié en 1880 démontre la constance de ses prises de position en ce sens. Mais pour légitimer à la fois ses positions et cette solution, il lui fallut minimiser l'étendue de la catastrophe en Irlande, notamment en lui opposant la pauvreté des ouvriers anglais ; dénoncer les travers moraux des Irlandais et les présenter comme la cause première de leurs difficultés ; défendre le bilan du gouvernement et du peuple anglais en insistant tant sur leur générosité que sur leur réalisme ; et enfin souligner tous les avantages d'une Loi sur les pauvres calquée sur le modèle anglais. En septembre 1847, le *Times* – et l'aile la plus dogmatique du Parti libéral – eut gain de cause avec la mise en oeuvre de l'amendement à la Loi sur les pauvres



---

## Entrées d'index

**Mots-clés** : Irlande, Grande Famine, Lord John Russell, Times

**Aires géographiques** : Grande-Bretagne, Royaume-Uni, Irlande, Iles britanniques

**Périodes** : 1846-1847, xixe siècle

**Thèmes** : histoire politique, Grande Famine

---

## Texte intégral

### Introduction<sup>1</sup>

1 *The Times* was without a doubt the most influential newspaper in Britain at the time of the Great Famine. Its circulation in 1848 was far higher than that of other national daily papers:<sup>2</sup>

2 *The Times* 35,338

3 *Daily News* 11,316

4 *Morning Advertiser* 4,930

5 *Morning Herald* 4,279

6 *Morning Chronicle* 3,687

7 *Morning Post* 3,034

8 Beyond this quantitative aspect, it is important to underline the exceptional moral and intellectual authority commanded by the *Times*, notably within the British governing class. Charles Greville for instance described it in his memoirs as “the leviathan of the press”.<sup>3</sup>

9 During the Great Famine, the newspaper devoted considerable space in its columns to Ireland, and its influence on the government’s Irish policy is referred to in most histories of the Great Famine. Several books dealing more specifically with British representations of Ireland go into some detail, with the overall conclusion being that the *Times* pressed for a minimalist relief policy, notably by presenting the Irish as undeserving of British support.

10 Leslie Williams has noted for instance that: “*The Times* continued to depict the worst famine in a century as an extension of normal, recurring events.”<sup>4</sup> Edward Lengel states that the newspaper “was no friend of the Irish people; indeed, abuse of the Irish was a regular feature of its columns.”<sup>5</sup> Michael de Nie has underlined the way the *Times* was

continually complaining of the financial burdens forced on British workers for the sake of the starving Irish. Usually the *Times* [...] used the announcement of new relief measures as an opportunity to provoke resentment among their readers, noting that aid was received with ingratitude or that English laborers were suffering under increased taxes. [...] These editorials contributed to British alienation and reinforced other views of the famine that called for letting the Irish shift for themselves.<sup>6</sup>

11 The objective of this article is to study the influence of the *Times* on the government’s Irish policy more closely. Rather than a systematic analysis of all the articles published between 1845 and 1851 – a huge task given that the *Times* “had a leader on Ireland and an Ireland column almost every day during the Famine”<sup>7</sup> – it will focus on a selection of leading articles published between 1846 and 1847.

This selection was made by the newspaper itself in 1880, at a time when Ireland once again faced famine, although on a lesser scale than in 1845-51, and when similar issues



were being debated: free trade and food supplies, emigration, the Poor Law as a means of providing relief, and the tenure of land. That led the *Times* to publish a volume of articles dating from the Great Famine, a decision which it justified on the grounds that: “such a reproduction of the measures then proposed, or adopted, and the opinions then expressed, cannot fail to be highly instructive and interesting, now that, after a lapse of more than 30 years, the Sister Island is again suffering from deficient harvests.”<sup>8</sup>

13 The volume contains over 70 pieces published between 7 August 1846 and 30 December 1847. There are leading articles, as well as letters, Treasury minutes, and parliamentary debates. They bring a variety of points of view to the collection, which contributes to its overall value. Among the letters for instance there are some from members of local relief committees, from landowners, from Irish peers and MPs, from an agent of the British Relief Association, from officials, as well as anonymous letters. There is a plurality of viewpoints, therefore, which is certainly helpful in understanding the public debate on Ireland in 1846-7.

14 Yet those letters and official documents will be left aside in this article, not because they lack interest but because the objective is to study the line defended by the *Times*, and that is most clearly expressed in the leading articles of the newspaper, 48 of which are published in the volume. Indeed, under John Delane’s editorship (1841-77), the newspaper devoted much attention to its editorials.<sup>9</sup>

15 The selection is also quite relevant in terms of its time frame: the period between August 1846 and December 1847 was decisive as far as official relief measures are concerned. Indeed, the most important – as well as the most controversial – reforms were passed at that time: the Labour-Rate Act of August 1846 and the Poor Law Extension Act of June 1847. Surprisingly enough, however, the title of the book mentions different dates: 1845-46. It is an interesting mistake, in the sense that it could be seen to imply that the famine was in fact limited to the final months of the Peel administration and that it ended with the formation of a Whig government under Lord John Russell.

16 The *Times* was certainly closer to the Whigs than to the Conservatives. On 14 July 1846 – a couple of weeks after Lord John Russell had formed his administration – Greville recorded in his diary that the new government had “concluded an alliance” with the *Times* which gave “them a temperate, judicious, but very useful support.”<sup>10</sup> That was partly due to ideological affinities between the newspaper and the Whigs, and partly to the frequent personal contacts between them. The *Times*’ claim to represent public opinion and its capacity to shape it to some extent could leave no minister indifferent: they were eager to cultivate good relations with the paper’s staff in the hope of obtaining positive coverage of their policies. If John Delane, the *Times*’ editor, was careful to maintain his newspaper’s independence, he knew full well that ministers constituted a privileged source of information and could not be neglected. In 1845 for instance the *Times* had been the first to announce the government’s intention to repeal the Corn Laws thanks to its connection with Lord Aberdeen.

17 Yet that close relationship did not preclude disagreements, and the *Times* did criticise Russell’s policy, quite sharply at times. Peter Gray suggests that the appointment of Lord Clarendon to the office of Lord Lieutenant of Ireland in May 1847 may well have been an attempt to use his personal connection with Delane to mollify the *Times*’ position.<sup>11</sup> Clarendon also wrote many letters to Henry Reeve, the *Times*’ chief leading writer, in which he attempted to justify his policies.<sup>12</sup> In fact a number of articles were placed by ministers seeking to advance their own agendas. Clarendon was involved in such manoeuvres, as well as Charles Wood, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, and Charles Trevelyan, the Assistant Secretary at the Treasury.<sup>13</sup> It is hardly surprising therefore if points of convergence over Ireland between the *Times* and the Whig



administration were numerous.

- 18 Among the recurring themes in the articles published in the selection of 1880, four of them, which are interrelated and which prepared public opinion for the Poor Law Extension Act of 1847, will be studied. Firstly, the *Times* repeatedly made the point that Ireland was not poor, that it was richer in fact than England, or at least than the English labourer whose taxes financed relief in Ireland. In other words, there was no justification for spending money from the Imperial Exchequer to pay for Irish distress. A second recurring theme is that the problem in Ireland was not the famine itself, which was generally minimised in the *Times*' columns, but the character of the Irish, whose apathy and indolence were presented as the primary cause of all their difficulties. This meant that relief was not a long-term solution; the only effective remedy was to reform the people and Irish society in general. A third point was that the British acted honourably during the famine and that they could not be suspected of having reneged on their duties; the numerous attacks, both at home and abroad, against government policy were thus groundless from that point of view. Finally, the *Times* insisted that the only satisfactory solution to the Irish crisis was a Poor Law on the English model, by which landlords would pay for the relief of their poor – in other words, Irish property should support Irish poverty.

## Questioning Irish poverty and distress

- 19 If we begin with the first theme, it is striking to see how the *Times* harps on about Ireland's supposed wealth. In a leading article published on 19 August 1846, shortly after the Labour-Rate Act was passed, the newspaper expressed its objection to Treasury loans aimed at financing public works. Previously, under the Peel administration, the Treasury had paid half the cost. If the Whig administration ended the system of government half grants, it nonetheless afforded loans to local authorities to get public works started. But the *Times* argued that it was unlikely that money would be paid back, and thus the English would end up footing the bill. Such an outcome was unacceptable from its point of view, because Ireland exported "a greater quantity of food than any other equal country in the world"; it therefore had enough capital and could, "of course, pay for its own improvement."<sup>14</sup>
- 20 On 27 August, the *Times* presented English labourers as being in a lower position in the social scale than the Irish employed on public works. It claimed that the money lent to Ireland was the fruit of English toil, and that English labourers were thus carrying the weight of Irish relief through the taxes they paid:

Let no one cavil at the statement that it is the labouring man who lends the money [...] he claims no land, he knows no rights, he accumulates no store, he forms no conspiracies, he frequents no demonstrations, he gathers round no leader. Yet these patient creatures are in fact subscribing for the employment of a class, which claims much higher position in the social scale.<sup>15</sup>

- 21 To those who argued that major relief measures were necessary given the catastrophic situation in Ireland, the *Times* replied by refuting the claim that the crisis was unusual: "It must be remembered that the English, the Scotch, and the Irish peasant are exactly in the same evil plight. The Irishman is destitute, so is the Scotchman and so is the Englishman."<sup>16</sup> The only difference in fact according to the *Times* was that English labourers never complained, while the Irish made a great fuss: "it appears to us of the very first importance to all classes of Irish society to impress on them that there is nothing really so peculiar, so exceptional, in the condition which they look upon as the



pit of utter despair.”

- 22 On 15 September 1846, the *Times* insisted on the need to damp down expectations in Ireland, where too many people were looking to the government for relief. Once again the figure of the English labourer was invoked to reject any special measures for Ireland:

Is the English labourer to compensate the Irish peasant for the loss of potatoes, and secure him a regular employer for this next twelvemonth? Why, the English labourer is in just the same case. The English labourer has lost his potatoes. [...] Not one English labourer in ten has at this moment either a stock of food, or means to purchase food, for a month. He depends entirely on employment; and many, full many, must this winter leave their homes, and traverse the country in quest of work.<sup>17</sup>

- 23 In November 1846 the *Times* noted that over the previous twelve months deposits in Irish savings banks had exceeded withdrawals, including in Connaught, the poorest province of the island and one of those which had received most relief. Its conclusion from the increased bank accounts was: “A few more famines, and Ireland will become one of the wealthiest countries in the world.”<sup>18</sup> And in March 1847, when the publication of new statistics confirmed that trend, the paper continued in its sarcastic vein:

Undoubtedly, the thought that would first cross the simple English mind, at the mention of the savings-banks, is that they would exhibit, in due proportion, the drain on the general resources. A famished people one expects to be poor. A population of eight millions, out of whom three or four are on the charity list, and a large portion of the remainder are said to be actually dying, or dead, in ditches, cannot have much to lay by.<sup>19</sup>

By constantly questioning the reality of the famine, the *Times* undermined feelings of empathy and charity among its English readers. In October 1847, when a second national subscription for Ireland was organised, the *Times* took position against it: “We do not [...] fear the imputation of inhumanity when we say that public opinion is decidedly averse to this repeated ‘begging’ for Ireland.”<sup>20</sup>

- 24 The *Times*’ impatience with the repeated pleas from Ireland was not always expressed in such moderate language, however. In September 1847, when some local authorities in Ireland asked to be absolved from the loans they had incurred during the previous season, because of their reduced means and the increased need to provide for the hungry after a second bad harvest, the newspaper did not hold its punches: Ireland, “after sucking the very blood of England for these many months, returns much the same thanks to the people who have suffered, and are suffering, for her sake, that a wolf would return to the man who should be simple enough to draw it out of a pit.”<sup>21</sup>

## The need to reform the Irish

- 25 The *Times*’ objection to further aid to Ireland thus rested on an extremely negative depiction of the Irish people, who appear as lazy, ungrateful and avid. That led the newspaper to express growing exasperation at their demands on the government:

What will they next insist on? That the Government should give them seed; and not only this, but sow it for them! And then, that the ordinary duties of husbandry shall be performed by Government servants, under Government supervision, at Government cost, and with the usual reward of Government undertakings – a deficit?<sup>22</sup>



- 26 The *Times* came to the conclusion that raising money for Ireland would prove useless, if not counterproductive, since the real cause of Irish difficulties from its point of view was not want of food or money, but the moral defects of the people:

It is not that any doubt exists as the reality of Irish distress, and the necessity of strong and timely measures of relief. Something must be done, and more must be done than has yet been done for Ireland, but the more this is felt, and the more the calamities and perplexities of that ill-fated country attract our sympathy and stimulate our speculation, the more it is felt that importunate appeals to the benevolent are not the right way of meeting a case of permanent and inveterate national degradation.<sup>23</sup>

- 27 When a first national subscription was launched in March 1847, the *Times* questioned it, arguing that “a generous policy” was not necessarily “a wise one”.<sup>24</sup> It underlined the problematic nature of government aid, since it created dependence among the Irish who were only too happy to remain idle:

They have tasted of public money, and they find it pleasanter to live on alms than on labour. The alternative raises no feelings of shame or self-abasement. Deep, indeed, has the canker eaten; not into the core of a precarious and suspected root, but into the very hearts of the people, corrupting them with a fatal lethargy, and debasing them by a fatuous dependence!

- 28 In other words, the *Times* refused to countenance greater assistance because it would only aggravate the root cause of the crisis, which it considered to be the apathy and improvidence of the Irish. And when Irish voices denounced the parsimony of government relief, the *Times* was quick to point out that: “The Government was required to ward off starvation, not to pamper indolence.”<sup>25</sup>

- 29 In late September 1846, however, it had become obvious that the government’s relief measures were not working: people were dying on the public works, either because they were too weak to earn enough, or because they were paid with considerable delays. Yet the *Times* argued that the relief measures had been well designed and would have proved effective in any other country than Ireland: “But what would happen in other countries never does happen in Ireland. There the process as well as the motive of every action is inverted.”<sup>26</sup> The only way out therefore was to change the habits of the people:

An island, a social state, a race is to be changed. The surface of the land, its divisions, its culture, its proprietors, its occupiers, its habitations, its manners, its law, its language, and the heart of a people who for two thousand years have remained unalterable within the compass of those mighty changes which have given us European civilization, are all to be created anew.<sup>27</sup>

- 30 That was a recurring argument put forward by the *Times* during the famine. The crisis was the result of moral and social diseases more deadly than the potato blight: “Let it not be said that we are taunting misery or upbraiding famine. We are pointing out a malady in the national character which has preceded and induced a more fearful malady in the physical condition of the people.”<sup>28</sup>

- 31 It claimed that many sources of food, like fish stocks off the Irish coast, were being neglected by the Irish:

All these things are facts beyond doubt and denial. We repeat them not for reproach or contumely, but to show that there are ingredients in the Irish character which must be modified and corrected before either individuals or Governments can hope to raise the general condition of the people. [...] Nothing effectual can be achieved until the habits of the people are changed.<sup>29</sup>





saw that as another instance of the deficient character of the Irish:

There is one shocking feature of the famine in Ireland which has forcibly impressed itself on the English public, and which we animadvert on now for the benefit of those whom it specially concerns. So shockingly prominent is it that we venture to say it will ever be recorded as distinguishing the present from similar calamities. The astounding apathy of the Irish themselves to the most horrible scenes immediately under their eyes, and capable of relief by the smallest exertion, is something absolutely without parallel in the history of civilized nations.<sup>30</sup>

33 It also blamed the Irish for their seemingly boundless political energy, which it contrasted to their apathy when it came to assisting the starving or the dead: “Half the labour that has been lavished in holding meetings to pass resolutions against the Government or in writing scurrilous and foolish letters, would have sufficed to supply food, or, failing that, Christian burial to all the cases of undoubted starvation.”<sup>31</sup>

34 At times the newspaper expressed despair at the sight of the hopeless Irish:

It is, indeed, the gloomiest feature of the crisis. Physical evil could be mitigated [...]. But what art, what policy, what wealth is cunning enough, wise enough, rich enough to assuage the moral evils and stay the moral disease of a vast population steeped in the congenial mire of voluntary indigence and speculating on the gains of a perpetuated famine?<sup>32</sup>

35 Ireland was thus presented as a bottomless pit, in which “the random recklessness of Government benevolence”<sup>33</sup> would lead the country to dilapidate all its wealth to no avail:

Never let anyone pretend to be satisfied that he knows the worst of that country. Depend on it, there is worse still in store. It has been called an incubus, a burden, a millstone, a chaos, a ditch, a slough of despond, a Maelstrom. Alas! these are feeble expressions. They are much too finite. Under the heaviest burden you can only fall to the ground. A ditch, a bog, a Charybdis itself has a bottom. Not so Ireland. Of all human things it presents the nearest approach to an infinite idea. Each year opens to the awe-struck soul a perpetual increasing vista of misery, trouble, animosity, expense, mismanagement, and ingratitude.<sup>34</sup>

## Defending the British record

36 The *Times*' opposition to greater relief efforts was not always easy to justify, however, especially when harrowing accounts from Ireland were published and when many voices expressed uneasiness or outright criticism of British policy, both at home and abroad. In one rare moment of doubt, the *Times* wondered how future historians and economists would assess “the quarrel of the Saxon and the Celt”, suggesting that the question of food exports from Ireland to Britain would be examined closely in order to better understand the nature of the relationship between both islands.<sup>35</sup>

37 It described the sight of “whole fleets of provisions [...] continually arriving from the land of starvation to the ports of wealth and the cities of abundance” as a “visible contradiction” or rather a “painful anomaly”. It wondered whether Britain was comparable to “Imperial States subsisting, waxing fat and wanton, on the vital wealth of their dependent provinces”, because if Ireland did not receive anything in return for its food, it would be “hard to escape the inference that there exists some sort of oppression” and that those exports were in fact the “tribute of a weak and conquered realm”.

In other words it was no longer sufficient to insist on the wealth of the Irish or to condemn their character; it was becoming necessary to defend Britain's record and to





make it clear that the newspaper and its readers were not cold-hearted or selfish. In January 1847 for instance the *Times* wrote: “We are perfectly aware that we have incurred in some quarters the imputation of heartlessness for some of our suggestions on Irish affairs.”<sup>36</sup> But it went on to explain that the special circumstances in Ireland required a stern approach, since the only way to save Ireland was to teach it a lesson: “There are occasions when something like harshness is the greatest humanity.”

39 A similar point was made in December 1847, when the *Times* managed to underline both the generosity of the English and the lack of sense of the Irish:

We would rather teach the people there ten maxims of good management than show them ten hundred new planets. The O’Connells, after all, are right in saying we have done nothing for the country. We gave or lent them last winter £10,000,000, but we did not give them, for we could not give them, one sixpen’orth of sense.<sup>37</sup>

40 The newspaper also devoted lines to the vast efforts deployed by the British administration, mentioning “the greatest, most extensive, most difficult, and most costly measure of immediate relief ever attempted by this or any other nation”.<sup>38</sup> It considered that the English, as a people, had done “all that the most exacting foe or the most jealous rival could have imposed on our submission or our conscience.”<sup>39</sup>

41 In August 1847 a long article was written to celebrate the vast soup-kitchen network established throughout the island, thanks to which some 3 million people were fed each day, and next to which the logistics of feeding the armies of the Duke of Marlborough and of the Duke of Wellington paled into insignificance:

Three millions of persons fed upon rations supplied by public bounty! The fact is without a parallel in history. [...] what a drop of water in the ocean was the body of men for which [*Marlborough and Wellington*] had to provide when compared with the 3,000,000 of Irish, men, women, and children, who, by the beneficent and unexampled exertions of the Legislature and the Government, have been snatched from the jaws of famine and the gates of death. We will leave the Irish agitators to their own reflections on the subject. Every reproach, every invective they utter, in the presence of this great fact, will be trumpet-tongued for their own dishonour and confusion.<sup>40</sup>

## An effective Poor Law

42 From the beginning, however, the *Times* had insisted that the only effective remedy to the famine in Ireland was a poor law on the English model.<sup>41</sup> That was precisely the aim of the soup kitchen act: the distribution of food allowed to feed the people while public works were wound down. After the harvest, all those requiring relief would be addressed to the workhouses, which would be financed from the local poor rate. There was to be no more money from the Imperial Exchequer.

43 If that seemed harsh on the Irish, the *Times* reminded its readers that the English paid for their own poor through such a system, and that they did not count the cost:

We in England have sacrificed everything to the maintenance of our own poor. The landowners, the farmers, and even the labourers themselves have all been tasked, pressed, mulcted, degraded, ruined, and ousted from their property and rights, to ensure a certainty of relief for the poor. For generations the pauper has been the real landlord. Ireland must do what we have done and suffer what we have suffered, in the sacred cause of charity. It must maintain its own poor.<sup>42</sup>



To those who argued that there was no comparison between the situation in England and that in Ireland, and that the Poor Law would prove ineffective in some unions that

were particularly hard-pressed, the *Times* replied:

They tell us that there are parishes where the whole produce of the land is insufficient to the maintenance of the poor. We do not believe it. But at any rate the experiment must be tried. Let the whole produce be seized. When that is done, and when all the crops have passed through the books of the parish or union, we shall be in better condition to ascertain the ratio which the resources of the soil bear to the population upon it.<sup>43</sup>

45 At the end of August 1847, the *Times* looked forward to the end of all relief measures and downplayed the worries of those who believed it would aggravate difficulties: “From the 12<sup>th</sup> of September next Ireland must swim alone, the Irish poor must be supported by the Irish soil. There should be nothing disheartening in this proposition for men who are worthy of the name.”<sup>44</sup>

46 It suggested that any further money from Britain would only encourage rate-payers to shirk their duty, while collectors would lack an incentive to carry out their work.<sup>45</sup> In December 1847, in one of the last articles in the volume, the *Times* expressed its optimism as to the prospects for Ireland, thanks to the reform of the poor law:

That law, as it now stands, is a step of incalculable importance; so much so that, unless we are mistaken, it will hereafter be thought to compensate the horrors of “the Great Irish Famine.” It has a sufficient resemblance to our own to promise similar results. [...] It is a regular system, and insures some beneficial results besides the mere relief of distress. Certainly nothing has contributed so much to the present state of English industrial society as our Poor Law; and if Ireland is ever to be made like England, that will be one of its merits.<sup>46</sup>

## Conclusion

47 The volume of leading articles reveals a very consistent position. The *Times*’ overall objective was to ensure that the Imperial Exchequer would no longer provide any money for Irish relief. Immediately after the Whig administration was formed in July 1846, the *Times* advocated a reform of the poor law, so that Irish property would be made to support Irish poverty. That was achieved in a little over one year.

48 The *Times*’ campaign was successful, but to justify such a policy it was necessary to minimise the extent of the crisis in Ireland, which was done in two ways: the newspaper argued that Ireland was not as poor as it seemed, and that its condition was no worse than that of English labourers, on the contrary. Another line of attack was to present Irish society as fundamentally unsustainable, notably by emphasising the moral defects of the people. A liberal approach to the famine would only perpetuate poverty and indolence, whereas a harsher policy would allow a major overhaul of Ireland and its inhabitants, thus creating hope for the future.

49 Yet such a policy aroused much criticism, be it in Ireland, in Britain, or abroad. To keep its readers on board, the *Times* needed to defend the record of the government and by extension of the English in general. They were depicted as patient, generous and willing to help their neighbours, but as drawing the line when it became obvious that they were only being asked to subsidise laziness, violence and ingratitude.

50 They were also presented as bearing a heavy burden with their own poor, while the English labourer – “not a typical *Times* reader”<sup>47</sup> – was described as a poor wretch who should not be further pressed to alleviate the condition of those who were better off than he was. The contrast between the patient English labourer and the despicable Irish rebel could only reduce the patience and generosity of the *Times*’ readers in relation to Ireland.



51 The newspaper's sustained attacks against further relief must be held partly responsible for the parsimonious nature of official relief policy after 1846. It legitimised the position of the Whig government's most hard-line members, a position that eventually prevailed. One can only wonder how many lives would have been saved if it had supported the more liberal wing of the government or if it had thrown its considerable weight behind a more ambitious and generous relief policy. As it was, not only did the *Times*' campaign aggravate the scale of the catastrophe, it also dealt a severe blow to the very idea of the Union between Britain and Ireland, since it rejected the principle of solidarity between both islands.

#### Bibliography

- Cook, Edward. *Delane of the Times*, London, Constable, 1916.
- de Nie, Michael. *The Eternal Paddy: Irish Identity and the British Press, 1798-1882*, Madison (WI), U of Wisconsin P, 2004.
- Fegan, Melissa. *Literature and the Irish Famine, 1845-1919*, Oxford, Oxford UP, 2002.
- Gray, Peter. *Famine, Land and Politics: British Government and Irish Society, 1843-50*, Dublin, Irish Academic Press, 2001.
- Greville, Charles. *A Journal of the Reign of Queen Victoria from 1837 to 1852*, London, Longmans, 1885, 3 vol.
- Kinealy, Christine. *This Great Calamity: The Irish Famine, 1845-52* [1994], Dublin, Gill & Macmillan, 2006.
- Laughton, John Knox. *Memoirs of the Life and Correspondence of Henry Reeve, C.B., D.C.L.*, 2 vol., London, Longmans, Green & C°, 1898.
- Lengel, Edward G. *The Irish Through British Eyes: Perceptions of Ireland in the Famine Era*, Westport (CT), Praeger, 2002.
- Morley, T.P. *The Times and the Revolutionary Crisis of 1848*, PhD thesis, Thames Polytechnic, February 1985, [online], <[http://gala.gre.ac.uk/8687/1/T.\\_P.\\_Morley\\_1985.pdf](http://gala.gre.ac.uk/8687/1/T._P._Morley_1985.pdf)>, (accessed on 22 September 2014).
- The Great Irish Famine of 1845-1846. A collection of leading articles, letters, and parliamentary and other public statements, reprinted from The Times*, London, The Times Office, 1880.
- Williams, Leslie A. *Daniel O'Connell, The British Press and Irish Famine: Killing Remarks*, ed. William H.A. Williams, Aldershot, Ashgate (The Nineteenth Century Series), 2003.

---

## Notes

1 This paper was presented at the Day Conference in Bordeaux (MSH Aquitaine) on 5th December 2014 organised by the Universities of Bordeaux-Montaigne, Poitiers and Toulouse<sup>1</sup> with the generous help of the French Association of Irish Studies (SOFEIR). Link to WebTV Montaigne recording.

2 T.P. Morley, *The Times and the Revolutionary Crisis of 1848*, PhD thesis, Thames Polytechnic, February 1985, p. 33, [online], <[http://gala.gre.ac.uk/8687/1/T.\\_P.\\_Morley\\_1985.pdf](http://gala.gre.ac.uk/8687/1/T._P._Morley_1985.pdf)>, (accessed on 22 September 2014).

3 Charles Greville, *A Journal of the Reign of Queen Victoria from 1837 to 1852*, London: Longmans, 1885, vol. 2, p. 406.

4 Leslie A. Williams, *Daniel O'Connell, The British Press and Irish Famine: Killing Remarks*, ed. William H.A. Williams, Aldershot: Ashgate (The Nineteenth Century Series), 2003, p. 205.

5 Edward G. Lengel, *The Irish Through British Eyes: Perceptions of Ireland in the Famine Era*, Westport (CT): Praeger, 2002, p. 46.

6 Michael de Nie, *The Eternal Paddy: Irish Identity and the British Press, 1798-1882*, Madison (WI): U of Wisconsin P, 2004, pp. 98-99.

7 Melissa Fegan, *Literature and the Irish Famine, 1845-1919*, Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002, p. 6.



- 8 *The Great Irish Famine of 1845-1846. A collection of leading articles, letters, and parliamentary and other public statements, reprinted from The Times*, London: The Times Office, 1880, preface.
- 9 Edward Cook, *Delane of the Times*, London: Constable, 1916, pp. 287-90.
- 10 Greville, *A Journal of the Reign of Queen Victoria*, op. cit., p. 406.
- 11 Peter Gray, *Famine, Land and Politics: British Government and Irish Society, 1843-50*, Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2001, p. 169.
- 12 See John Knox Laughton, *Memoirs of the Life and Correspondence of Henry Reeve, C.B., D.C.L.*, 2 vol., London: Longmans, Green & Co, 1898, pp. 186-89.
- 13 Christine Kinealy, *This Great Calamity: The Irish Famine, 1845-52* [1994], Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 2006, p. 105.
- 14 "A Poor Law Necessary for Ireland", *The Times*, 19 August 1846.
- 15 "English Property Taxed for Irish Distress", *The Times*, 27 August 1846.
- 16 "Irish Dependence on State Aid", *The Times*, 8 September 1846.
- 17 "Irish Demands Upon the Government", *The Times*, 15 September 1846.
- 18 "The Irish Savings Banks", *The Times*, 6 November 1846.
- 19 "The Irish Savings Banks", *The Times*, 4 March 1847.
- 20 "England's Aid to Irish Distress", *The Times*, 12 October 1847.
- 21 "Local Pleas for Non-Payment of Loans", *The Times*, 8 September 1847.
- 22 "The Day of National Humiliation", *The Times*, 26 March 1847.
- 23 "England's Aid to Irish Distress", *The Times*, 12 October 1847.
- 24 "The Day of National Humiliation", *The Times*, 26 March 1847.
- 25 "Indolent Preference of Relief to Labour", *The Times*, 22 September 1846.
- 26 *Ibid.*
- 27 "The Duty of the Government", *The Times*, 9 October 1846.
- 28 "Neglect of Available Food Supplies", *The Times*, 5 November 1846.
- 29 "Indolent Preference of Relief to Labour", *The Times*, 22 September 1846.
- 30 "General Apathy in Ireland", *The Times*, 8 March 1847.
- 31 *Ibid.*
- 32 "The Day of National Humiliation", *The Times*, 26 March 1847.
- 33 "Indolent Preference of Relief to Labour", *The Times*, 22 September 1846.
- 34 "Cost of Relief", *The Times*, 26 January 1847.
- 35 "Food Exports from Ireland to England", *The Times*, 30 October 1846.
- 36 "Irish Property and Irish Poverty", *The Times*, 6 January 1847.
- 37 "The Need of Common Sense", *The Times*, 9 December 1847.
- 38 "Irish Property and Irish Poverty", *The Times*, 6 January 1847.
- 39 "The Day of National Humiliation", *The Times*, 26 March 1847.
- 40 "Magnitude of Relief Operations", *The Times*, 26 August 1847.
- 41 "A Poor Law Necessary for Ireland", *The Times*, 19 August 1846.
- 42 "Irish Property and Irish Poverty", *The Times*, 6 January 1847.
- 43 "Subsidence of the Distress", *The Times*, 14 August 1847.
- 44 "Closing of the Relief Fund", *The Times*, 24 August 1847.
- 45 "England's Aid to Irish Distress", *The Times*, 12 October 1847.
- 46 "The Value of an Irish Poor Law", *The Times*, 23 December 1847.
- 47 Fegan, *Literature and the Irish Famine*, op. cit., p. 48.



---

## ***Pour citer cet article***

### *Référence électronique*

Christophe GILLISSEN, « The Times and the Great Irish Famine 1846-47 », *Mémoire(s), identité(s), marginalité(s) dans le monde occidental contemporain* [En ligne], 12 | 2015, mis en ligne le 16 avril 2015, consulté le 01 juin 2022. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/mimmoc/1828> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/mimmoc.1828>

---

## ***Auteur***

### **Christophe GILLISSEN**

Spécialiste de civilisation irlandaise à l'Université de Caen-Basse Normandie, Christophe Gillissen a notamment travaillé sur la politique étrangère de l'Irlande, que ce soit dans le cadre de ses relations bilatérales, de sa politique multilatérale ou encore de sa politique européenne. Il a également publié des articles sur la Grande Famine en Irlande et co-dirigé le numéro de la *Revue française de civilisation britannique* consacré à cette question (2014)

---

## ***Droits d'auteur***



Mémoire(s), identité(s), marginalité(s) dans le monde occidental contemporain – Cahiers du MIMMOC est mis à disposition selon les termes de la licence Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International.

