



HAL
open science

The Famine as seen by the French: The Journal des Débats and the Great Famine 1846-1847

Susan Finding

► **To cite this version:**

Susan Finding. The Famine as seen by the French: The Journal des Débats and the Great Famine 1846-1847. Mémoire(s), identité(s), marginalité(s) dans le monde occidental contemporain. Cahiers du MIMMOC, 2015, The 1846-1851 Famine in Ireland: Echoes and Repercussions in Britain, the Empire and on the Continent / La Grande Famine en Irlande 1846-1851 : échos et répercussions (le Royaume-Uni, l'Empire, l'Europe), 12-2015, 10.4000/mimmoc.1830 . hal-02023806

HAL Id: hal-02023806

<https://hal.science/hal-02023806v1>

Submitted on 12 Jul 2021

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.

The Famine as seen by the French: The Journal des Débats and the Great Famine 1846-1847

La famine vue de France selon le Journal des Débats 1846-1847

Susan FINDING



Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/mimmoc/1830>

DOI: 10.4000/mimmoc.1830

ISSN: 1951-6789

Publisher

Université de Poitiers

Brought to you by Université de Poitiers



Electronic reference

Susan FINDING, "The Famine as seen by the French: The Journal des Débats and the Great Famine 1846-1847", *Mémoire(s), identité(s), marginalité(s) dans le monde occidental contemporain* [Online], 12 | 2015, Online since 16 April 2015, connection on 21 June 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/mimmoc/1830> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/mimmoc.1830>

This text was automatically generated on 21 June 2021.



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.

The Famine as seen by the French: The Journal des Débats and the Great Famine 1846-1847

La famine vue de France selon le Journal des Débats 1846-1847

Susan FINDING

Introduction

- 1 One of the first histories of the Great Famine remarks on the role of the press in relaying the stories of the famine, noting that the English thought Irish sources were unreliable.

The English people, and many in Ireland, long adhered to the opinion, that there was much exaggeration in the Irish Newspapers regarding both the Blight and the Famine; but subsequent investigation showed, that there was very little, if any exaggeration; nay, that the real facts were often understated.

Rev. John O'Rourke, St. Mary's, Maynooth, 1st December 1874

- 2 As will be seen, this opinion was expressed clearly during the famine years, and even reported in the French press. This paper looks at how the politically orthodox *Journal des Débats politiques et littéraires*, close to July Monarchy government circles in France, perceived and reported on issues concerning Ireland in the critical years 1846 and 1847. Its sources of information were the English and Irish press, and the columns of its pages reveal sympathy both for the British government – with the emphasis placed heavily on lessons to be learnt in order to avoid social unrest in times of dearth – but also for the (Catholic) Irish people suffering at the hands of fate in a situation engendered by English colonialism: wrought by God, abetted by the English.
- 3 The *Journal des Débats politiques et littéraires* was a daily four-page paper, printed in Paris. Its title indicates its primary function which was to publish French legislative assembly debates in and serve the political and cultural elites. First published in 1789 as the *Journal*

des Débats et des Décrets, it became the *Journal de l'Empire*, assuming its final full title after the Restoration of the French Monarch in 1815.¹ In the early 19th century, it was the most widely distributed newspaper in France, with a circulation figure of 13,000 in 1830. One of its contributors was Chateaubriand, another was Berlioz. Under its editor, Armand Bertin, who took over from his father, Louis-Armand Bertin, in 1841, it supported the July Monarchy and after the 1848 revolution sided with the reactionary cause. It was mainly read by Parisian and provincial *notables* in cafés, reading rooms and circles. Many readers shared the high subscription fees, 80 French francs at the time (the equivalent of a working man's wages for 400 hours work), ensuring that each copy printed was read several times.²

- 4 The paper published articles on foreign and domestic affairs, of political, judicial and economic nature (the price of corn, news from the banks, the state of the London Stock Exchange). Occasionally, French provincial events of note figure in its pages. It also published literary reviews and works of fiction in weekly installments – it had serialized Eugène Sue's *Les Mystères de Paris*, with great success from June 1842 to October 1843 – and by the 1840s was devoting a full half-page to advertisements. It reported foreign news second-hand from reports published in foreign papers, and in the particular case of Britain, appears to have kept a keen finger on the pulse of British diplomacy, politics and the economy, by regular packet deliveries of the British dailies: *The Times*,³ *The Morning Chronicle* and *The Globe*. It is principally the latter two that are cited with reference to Irish affairs.
- 5 In the 1840s the *Globe* and the *Morning Chronicle* were under the control of Lord Palmerston, Foreign Secretary under Melbourne (1830-1841), then Lord Grey (1846-1851) later Home Secretary and Prime Minister and Palmerston is known to have 'fed' news to these papers and indeed, written pieces for them, and even ensured that more copies of *The Globe* were distributed abroad than *The Times* as a means of influencing opinion abroad. The use made of these two papers by the *Journal des Débats* as witnessed here appears to vindicate that strategy.⁴
- 6 A survey of the articles devoted to Irish and British affairs from January 1846 to January 1847 reveals the extent to which the famine was receiving coverage in French political and cultural spheres. It does not reveal however any French attempts to intervene or provide relief to fellow Catholics, quite the contrary. It does nevertheless betray concern with the consequences of a generalized hunger and its social and political implications. In 1846-1847 France suffered from subsistence crises in several areas the Morvan, the Loiret, the Loir-et-Cher, the South-West, Normandy and the Bas-Rhin were all subject to severe shortfalls in wheat production, leading in several cases to riots, though there appears to be little or no mention of these in the pages of *Le Journal des Débats*.⁵
- 7 In September 1846, the *Journal des Débats* reported at length on the possible shortfall in the harvest in France, warning against any alarmist reports. It drew negative lessons from the situation in Britain, where, in order to feed "six million starving Irish", massive imports of grain had led firstly to a fall in the market price, then to a sharp rise. What should be most feared was fear itself: "The gravest danger in such circumstances, is, we repeat, the ill that fear can bring; we must strive to keep the population from that." It warned that any special measures were likely to aggravate the situation and increase speculation and hoarding, and the editorial hoped that the current panic would, like that of the previous year, leave no serious or durable damage.⁶

- 8 The reports on the Irish Famine in its pages must therefore be read with this context in mind and can be seen as lessons in crisis management for the French government.

Pre-famine early 1840s Ireland

- 9 The readers of the *Journal des Débats* were regularly given articles devoted to the debates in the House of Lords and the Commons. The discussions on protectionism and tariffs, on the extension of the suffrage (1832), Catholic emancipation and the Repeal, had all been reported on in its pages, with Daniel O'Connell figuring prominently. However, it was not until 1842 (*Journal des Débats*, 16th June) that the first reports concerning the distress and misery of the working-classes in the manufacturing districts in Britain and of people in Ireland were published. The reasons for this misery, distress and rioting, lack of work, hunger and desperation, are not mentioned. Whereas the fate of the working-classes remained vague and was only mentioned in reports on debates in Parliament, the 'frightening distress which reigns throughout Ireland' and 'excessive misery of the Irish people' was given space (20th June 1842) in lines taken from *The Sun*⁷ devoted to a riot in Galway caused by the 'price of food' where 'exasperated masses' went searching for hidden stores of potatoes. These lines are followed by the apparently more important two-column report on the trial and conviction of John Francis, who had attempted to shoot and kill the Queen on 30th May⁸. O'Connell's speech in the House on 8th July 1842, lamenting the inaction of Peel's government after three bad harvests and predicting 'some strange calamity', was reported on in full (*Journal des Débats*, 12th July).
- 10 In 1843, Irish issues raised in the columns of the *Journal*, almost exclusively concern agitation but again not the underlying economic or social causes : the regulation of firearms in an attempt to deal with 'the state of anarchy which reigns there' in the words of one M.P. [James?] O'Brien (1st May 1843), O'Connell's triumphant meetings throughout the country after his revocation as Justice of the Peace (30th May 1843), the refusals to pay taxes, the debate on O'Brien's motion on the sufferings in Ireland (15th July 1843), Lord Russell's criticism of Peel's repressive measures in Ireland (31st July 1843), and the boeing of the Dublin postal stagecoach (15th August 1843). Sedition and the question of Irish secession from the Union were reported alongside debates in the Houses, notably on the Queen's speech (27th August 1843) and on the Repeal of the Union (17th September 1843). In these pages of the *Journal*, Irish agitation appears to have little cause, to be almost second-nature, leaving the impression of a quarrelsome and proud, but difficult people, of feckless Fenians.
- 11 By a curious circularity and reversal of the flow of news and opinion, the pages of the *Journal des Débats* (3rd October 1843) reprint a verbatim translation of a speech made by Daniel O'Connell himself denouncing the bias and venality of the *Journal des Débats*, under the thumb of French Prime Minister Guizot. To complete the recursive nature of this episode, O'Connell read in the *Times* of the *Journal's* opinion that he, O'Connell, "like Frankenstein, was staring in fear at the monster he had created"⁹ but that Repeal agitation had ceased. On the contrary, that autumn, as the articles devoted in the *Journal* to Repeal meetings reveal, that was not the case. Throughout 1844, the continued political agitation was reported on. From time to time, odd cases of horse-thieving, shipwreck and husband-murdering complete the picture and enhance the portrait of the Irish previously given. In 1845, it is the question of subsidized Catholic education around the Maynooth Grant issue which features in the pages of the *Journal* (14th April 1845, 25th

May 1845). Enigmatic references to ‘further collision between the police and peasants’ in Ireland when one man was killed, occur that summer (12th July 1845) and to the government delaying legislation on compensation for tenant farmers (20th July), but no explanation or analysis of the issue is forwarded. Finally, in November 1845, in an article on the general agricultural situation in France and abroad, mention is made for the first time of failing crops:

Apprehension about the harvest was strongest in England but has been largely assuaged. It was feared that the potato crop had been totally lost in Ireland, but it only suffered partial damage, whilst the corn harvest, while not being as plentiful as in previous years, is better than had been expected. (*Journal des Débats*, 19th November 1845)

- 12 An astute reader would perhaps have made the link between these rare disparate mentions but the *Journal* did not deem it necessary to delve further or to develop the story. It is only in a translated extract from an editorial in the *Morning Chronicle* (1801-1865) calling for a strong ministry under the leadership of Lord John Russell (as opposed to the weak government of Sir Robert Peel) that mention is first made of famine in December 1845.

The situation in Ireland is greatly alarming. To save the people of Ireland from the horrors of famine, to invite commerce to come to their succour, vigorous and well-combined measures are needed, and above all, no time must be lost. (*Journal des Débats*, 19th December 1845)

Free trade and anti-landlordism

- 13 From early 1846 the *Journal des Débats* covered Peel’s attempts to get the Corn Laws repealed (January 8th) and notes O’Connell’s support for this measure in a letter to the Mayor of Limerick. O’Connell considered cheap bread, which would result, to be of the greatest importance for the labouring classes of England and Ireland. That same month (17th January), the *Journal des Débats* published an *in extenso* translation of Lord John Russell’s reply upon receiving the keys to the city of Glasgow, in which he supports the Prime Minister’s decision to abolish the Corn Laws, as anything less would maintain the country in a ‘state of crisis’. What that crisis concerned was not specified. If the Chartists’ demands had been sparingly covered (for example, 15th June 1842), not surprisingly for a paper supporting the July Monarchy, by 1846 they had disappeared from its pages.
- 14 Regular readers would have recognized the allusion to agitation around the Corn Laws and the beginnings of a food shortage in Ireland, due to an infrequent but growing number of references to it. This was confirmed when, two days later (19th January), the paper published a long four-column article on the parliamentary intrigues around the abolition of protectionism based on a report from London, dated 16th January. This was followed the next day by an article on electoral corruption (patronage and the Lords) which served attempts to protect seats where the electors voted for the landowning aristocracy in England, in whose interests the Corn Laws had been passed. Again, this was not to be read as a criticism of the aristocracy or oligarchy, merely as an attack on corruption and protectionism.
- 15 It is perhaps no coincidence that from 21st January a fictional serialization began, set in Ireland. It ran to 19th May. Written by Paul Féval (1816-1877), popular author of

adventure novels who rivalled Alexandre Dumas and Eugene Sue, the theme of *La quittance de minuit*, is one of vengeance and crime. Its title¹⁰ clearly indicates the subject matter – namely, the “MollyMaguires”, the secret societies for agrarian resistance, and it featured a family consisting of a father with eight children. “The Mac Diarmid could consider themselves wealthy in a country where want is the common lot”, while descriptions of their domestic circumstances include the cauldron of potatoes on the boil and poteen. A Catholic family, they are described as hating Galway Orangemen, Protestants, *ribbonmen* (other anti-landlord societies) and Saxon tyrants, “O’Connell was his God”. Sympathy for fellow Catholics labouring under injustice and English rule and who are portrayed as a proud and God-fearing people can be sensed in the novella, but there is no social or economic analysis or critique.

- 16 For several years before the famine, and even after the naming of the famine in its pages, the *Journal des Débats* had covered both the need to provide cheaper food for the masses in both Britain and Ireland as well as rebellious and nationalist sentiments among the people of Ireland.

Unrest and relief

- 17 In March 1846, discussions in the Commons on relief for Ireland were reported (16th March 1846) including the opening of Irish ports and purchase of grain from abroad, two measures which would effectively repeal the protectionist Corn Laws. In August, the *Journal des Débats* relayed the Lords’ Debates in which there was acknowledgement of the crisis which had been averted by the purchase of maize which saved the country from ‘incalculable ills’ according to the French, but coming food shortages were forecast with certainty by the paper (4th August 1846). On 13th September 1846, an editorial was devoted entirely to Ireland’s plight and to the short-termism which presided over recurrent problems of poverty in Ireland (reproduced in full below).
- 18 By autumn 1846, the worsening crisis is hinted at with increasingly frequent references to unrest. The paper began to relay reports of violent incidents concerning food supplies. This angle reflects the priorities and concerns of the French elite. The first instances reported in the paper immediately followed the editorial of 18th September (referred to above) warning against alarmist reports of a subsistence crisis in France. A translation of an article in *The Globe*¹¹ of 15th September reports “the following picture of the misery in Ireland” mentioning Carrick-on-Shannon (Co. Leitrim) and Ballinasloe (Co. Galway) people demanding bread or work. A further report (1st October) involves looting at Cloyne, (Co. Cork), bread distribution in Castlemartyr (Co. Cork), and rioting in Decies, (Co. Waterford). Three days later, on 4th October 1846, the *Journal* refers explicitly to the famine, again in connection, not so much with the famine conditions or its causes, as with its consequences: the unrest it was engendering and threats to the social order. Thus the items are given in the following order:

The famine in Ireland has already led to the saddest of scenes. In Dungarvan [sic] there was a conflict between the population & the troops. A detachment of dragoons was attacked with stones. An engagement took place elsewhere. The troop opened fire and several men were injured, two of whom died the following day.

The London papers are full of correspondence depicting the situation of the people in Ireland in the most somber colours.

- 19 Using accounts taken from *The Times*, the *Journal des Débats* proceeds to relate incidents in Youghal, Cork, in Crookhaven on 25th September, and from the *Clare Journal* [and *Ennis Advertiser*] (1778 - 1917) a 'collision' between soldiers and poor and starving people in Castleconnell, (Co. Limerick) (*Journal des Débats*, 11th October 1846). While the famine is acknowledged, it is the violence it has given rise to that is the main concern of the French paper.



Carte générale des Îles Britanniques contenant l'Angleterre, l'Écosse et l'Irlande : indiquant les principales routes, les canaux de navigation, les chemins de fer exécutés et en cours d'exécution dans la Grande-Bretagne / par J. Andriveau, 1839. The localities of Cloyne, Youghal, Dungarwan, Skibbereen are all visible on this section.

- 20 There are a few reports on temporary solutions to the distress, simply some reporting of employment for the poor in public works (using the *The [London?] Standard*) (1827-1900) and, later that month, reports of a subscription among Irish infantry soldiers serving in China, and the Marquess of Sligo's efforts to set up food depots and import food for sale at lower prices (22nd October, 26th October 1846). These are scanty references in comparison to the many local attempts to provide some relief and indicate the fears the Irish famine provoked among the French elite.
- 21 Thus when the *Journal* describes efforts to relieve the famine, one suspects the subtext to have been the question of how to prevent unrest from turning into revolt and general uprisings. The Irish question is being seen as an illustration of how to deal with such unrest – if such a situation came to pass in France, providing lessons for the French government. Upon news of the suspension of the United Kingdom Parliament for at least two months over the winter (December 1846-January 1847), bringing to a halt any measures which required Parliament's approval (duty-free imports of grain to England and Ireland), the *Journal* relayed, not surprisingly in view of its editorial line, the London press's applause for the wise decision not to give way to panic (26th October 1846).

The famine – causes and solutions

- 22 It was in the issue published on 7th November 1846 that the *Journal des Débats* devoted its first in-depth report on the famine in Ireland, occupying a full two and a half columns (out of five) on the front page (translated in full below). The report relates in detail the onset of the famine (causes), and the response in the form of government and charitable relief attempts, while noting the ineffectiveness of these measures in the face of such calamities. The article praises the Whig government's efforts and approach. It describes the public works and workings of the Boards of Works in detail. It surveys measures of

private relief, deemed totally incapable of remedying the situation, given the scale of the famine, and laments, “Thus, in spite of everything the government has done, in spite of the good will of such a number of generous landowners giving the example, do we read of new appalling and deplorable news in the Irish newspapers”, before giving a summary description of death, destitution, rioting and revolt.

- 23 Having looked at what had been attempted, the article then examines what should be done. It evaluates new proposals of how to resolve the crisis in view of the lack of success of previous efforts, and dismisses the purchasing of wheat abroad and distributing it for free as impractical, improbable, unreasonable and extravagant. It reprints in full the letter from Prime Minister Russell to the Duke of Leinster, the Whig leader in Ireland and Lord Chief Justice. This letter was, made public by the government and it explains how the only solution was a long-term one of agricultural improvement, to be achieved through public works, thus tacitly approving the new proposals.
- 24 The article ended with a back-handed compliment paid to the British government and landlords, agreeing with this prudence but laying the responsibility for the famine at their feet, as the oppressors of Ireland since its conquest, and slyly rejoicing in the humiliation which the famine in Ireland is proving to be for the English.

It must be recognized that the minister is right, and that, if one can attribute without injustice, a part, a large part of the ills which Ireland is suffering from today to the cruel fate that the English conquest subjected it to, it is also right to admit that the government is doing almost everything it can do to soften these appalling miseries whose excess humiliates the pride and diminishes the power of the country which has caused them. (*Journal des Débats*, 7th November 1846)

- 25 The following day, the *Journal* relayed Russell’s letter to the Duke of Leinster once more, insisting on “permanent proprietary interest in the soil”. This idea of a land-owning peasantry settled on improved land as a solution appears to have appealed to the *Journal*, as the subject is raised again at the end of the month.

The situation in Ireland continues to worry the English press and not one day goes by without some new project to relieve the distress of this unhappy country if not to completely cure it. The *Morning Chronicle* has already suggested several times a system which would be nothing less than a revolution which consists in reviewing landownership in Ireland, in such a way as it would transfer ownership to those who cultivate the land and are at the moment tenants, while at the same time guaranteeing the same income to those who currently own the land. The *Morning Chronicle* gives the French example to show that such a division of land ownership and multiplication of landowners would not lead to or increase pauperism. (*Journal des Débats*, 20th November 1846)

- 26 The example of a small-holding democracy appears to have been seen as a solution to both inefficient farming and social tensions. Likewise the examples of benevolent landowning aristocrats was cited when landowners such as the Earl of Charlemont (Lord Lieutenant of Tyrone), the Earl of Caledon, Baron Cremorne, and Viscount de Vesci¹², allowed rent reductions for their tenants afflicted by the famine, while the Marquess of Hertford, a major landowner, had rebates on rent and undertaken land improvements to the value of £40,000. (*Journal des Débats*, 9th November 1846). The *Journal des Débats*, true to

its leanings, supported enlightened landowners and encouraged a 'revolution' in land ownership, rather than social or political revolution.

Disorderly Irish, fears of contagion

- 27 As the death toll mounted, the *Journal des Débats* concentrated on the social and political consequences of the disaster.

In spite of the good will shown by the English government to come to the aid of Ireland, despite the activity of the Board of Works which, by 31st Oct. last, had already organized work for 110,251 men, despite the consequential reduction in the price of corn in England & Ireland, the news we receive every day from that unhappy country is constantly full of deplorable stories. Today the English papers relate numerous deaths occasioned by hunger, and the renewal of troubles in the northern counties, which in the present crisis, had until now enjoyed more tranquility than the south. (*Journal des Débats*, 13th November 1846)

- 28 The reports in the paper underlined disturbances and social unrest (*désorganisation sociale*) (10th November). It reported the Lord Lieutenant's proclamation to people of County Clare after recent excesses against people and property which had led to suspension of the general works programme in that county (8th Nov 1846), an attack on a landowner in Tipperary by "Molly Maguire's gang" [sic], the Dublin stagecoach being escorted by police, attacks by 'whiteboys' on a farmer to prevent him from taking rent, and the Lurgan Orangemen's demonstration reported as a drunken orgy. It laid the blame for this violence not just on hunger, but on the Irish 'habit of disorderliness'. This interpretation may be quite simply relaying the opinions put forward in the English press from where the *Journal des Débats* was sourcing its information, however one cannot ignore the fact that fears of hunger and of social uprising must also have been uppermost in the minds of the governing circles in France at the end of 1846.
- 29 It is not surprising therefore to find reports of angry scenes at markets in the Loire towns of Tours, Châteaurenault and Azay-le-Rideau, in the pages of the paper at the end of November 1846, when sacks of wheat were auctioned off by force by a crowd complaining about high prices, or reports of riots at Boulogne-sur-mer the same week, to prevent supplies of potatoes being loaded onto ships for export to England. The *Journal des Débats*, true to its editorial line, refrained from giving rise to further fears of a subsistence crisis in France by not commenting on the reasons for these outbreaks (shortfall in the harvest and speculative hoarding) and concluded severely that there should be "no hindrance to the freedom of trade, the best guarantee of the interests of the people" (November 1846). The irony of the situation seems to have been lost on the paper's contributors: free trade might guarantee lower prices for corn or potatoes for England and Ireland, but it was encouraging producers on the Continent to ship out supplies which were badly needed in France and leading to precisely those scenes of disorderly behaviour that the paper was highlighting in Ireland.
- 30 A further irony lies in the fact that, despite abhorring political revolution and less than two years before the *printemps des peuples* and the 1848 Revolution, at the end of 1846 the *Journal des Débats* was reminding its readers of the split in the nationalist movement between Young and Old Ireland, O'Connell and Smith O'Brien, giving full translated transcriptions of O'Connell's speech for example at Dublin on 9th November. Indeed, the

reports on the grass roots political developments in Ireland appear rather more sympathetically covered in the paper than those on the subsistence crisis and the social unrest caused. Sympathy for the political aspirations of the nationalist cause did not mean condoning upturning the social order.

Conclusion

31 As has been seen from this rapid overview of the reception of the news of the Great Famine in Ireland by the socially conservative, economically liberal *Journal des Débats*, supporting both the policies of Guizot and Palmerston, the French elite would find an echo of the British press, perhaps not quite as derogatory towards the Irish people as *The Times*,¹³ but nevertheless plainly on the side of non-intervention, rational landowners and benevolent aristocrats, plainly in tune with the policies in sway under the July Monarchy in France. Some sympathy for the Irish people can be detected, but it is mainly that of a country where Anglophobia was quick to surface – and criticism of British colonialism came easily – and, despite the advocating of free trade in the pages of the *Journal des Débats*, commercial and diplomatic rivalry with the British was strong.¹⁴

32 *****

Full text of editorial from 13th September 1846 issue of *Journal des Débats*

33 There has been much talk in England this past year concerning the almost total loss of the potato crop in Ireland. The coincidence between this talk of shortages, not to say famine, with the great economic reforms that the English government was preparing and which it has accomplished, were of a kind to let it be believed that there had been a lot of exaggeration. It was even suggested that potatoes were being calomniated, and that the disease had been invented, or at the least, incommensurably enlarged by a partisan spirit. It is obvious today that the ill was unfortunately only too true. A sort of cholera, almost as fatal as that which is decimating the population elsewhere, is striking with renewed force the only foodstuff consumed by four or five million men, and the famine, with its pale cortege of calamities in its wake, today floats above the whole of Ireland.

34 It is famine, in the full meaning of the word. There are in Ireland 4 million human beings who do not know the luxury of bread. The potato is their sole source of nourishment, their usual food. Last year, the crop was two-thirds lost, and it was thought that this was a passing ill, but it has returned, even more cruel, more deadly, more widespread, and hit the food of the people, not waiting until the potato was ripe, it has attacked its roots and stifled its flowers, and today, it is announced throughout Ireland, that there is no trace of greenery, and that in December, there will not be one single potato in the country.

35 Such is the picture that is presented every morning in the English newspapers. We are not painting the picture in other colours, we are only reproducing them with a sentiment of profound commiseration, of sincere and heartfelt sympathy. We recognize the efforts made by the government and the Parliament to find some remedy for this appalling misery. Much money has been sent from England to Ireland in the past year. Parliament, before going into recess, voted numerous emergency laws to come to the aid of the poor. But these measures have called attention to a new facet of the danger which is specific to Ireland.

- 36 What makes the social state of this unhappy country a special and almost desperate case, is that it has been usual to consider it as normal and natural. When it is reported that the Irish are dying of hunger, it seems to be the simplest thing in the world. It has almost become an axiom. That is not to say that the suffering of the Irish only encounters insensitive reactions or indifference in England. Far from it, they find sympathy, they find aid, but this suffering is considered to be something inevitable, which has always been and will always be. The present ills are addressed, but one is resigned, in an almost Muslim fashion, to the coming ills. That is why only temporary remedies are only ever applied to Ireland. Grants for the relief of 4 million poor people are voted, but the poor consider this sort of public “alms” as a due which cannot be refused, and thus, the celebrated Poor Law, which, these last few years has been to try and diminish that burden, sought to redress, with all the perils that enjoined.
- 37 Thus a remarkable circumstance which occurred last season. It is known that most of the hard labour in England is done by Irishmen. It is known that the workers from that country are flocking to centres of work amounting to a real invasion, which is by competition also bringing down wages. It has been noted this year that, in spite of the great amount of work occasioned by the building of the railways, and despite the growing rarity of resources in Ireland, the immigration of Irish workers to England has decreased. It appears that they themselves say that they are counting on grants the state will apply for their maintenance.
- 38 The British government is trying to stop going down this road, which would lead it to its being permanently and regularly involved in maintaining the poor. Therefore, before the end of the parliamentary session, it had a bill passed authorizing the Treasury to make advances for public works and the employment of workers, on condition that the moneys advanced by the State would be reimbursed within ten years, at a rate of interest of 3 per cent. But it is well-known, and it is proclaimed aloud both in England and in Ireland that these loans can only be disguised gifts, and that the money provided by the Treasury will never be returned. However, this attempt by the British government, is important, as it poses a question of principle, that of the intervention of the State towards private property. The government tells landlords: “You must give your poor either work or subsistence. If you do not have disposable monies, we will lend you some, and you will pay it back within ten years. But everyone must be able to live, even if you do not see the need for it.” The landlords murmured beneath their breath and complained. Parliament ignored them. In the end, wouldn’t it be better, if there are to be changes in ownership that the initiative come from above, than below?

39 *Journal des Débats politiques et littéraires*, 13th September 1846.

40 Translated by SF.

41 *****

Full text of *Journal des Débats* front page in-depth article on 7th November 1846

- 42 If the Whig ministry [Lord John Russell’s new government] has not found a new way of relieving the suffering of poor Ireland, if in the midst of the current calamities, it has only followed the errors and ideas of Sir Robert Peel, it must be recognized that it applies them with a rare energy and a zealous activity for which Ireland will one day be thankful. It will

no doubt be remembered, it was when England had just reformed its Corn Laws, when the protectionists were still filling Parliament with their lamentations and announcing that English agriculture would be ruined by the low prices to which all basic stuffs would fall due to foreign competition, that it was following a spring which appeared to promise a wonderful harvest, that England suddenly found itself threatened by shortage, that famine with all its horrors came to Ireland and to the Highlands in Scotland. Surprised (and what forethought would not have been taken by surprise), suddenly wrested from a mistaken security, the Whig ministers resolutely took the decision which honors them. If they have not imagined anything new, they at least had the good taste not to admit their powerlessness, and came immediately to purely and simply ask the Commons for the powers necessary to apply those remedies their illustrious opponent, Sir Robert Peel, had already put in place or identified, and even before Parliament had decided, the ordered an inquiry on the state of subsistence in Ireland. We have not yet heard that this commission's report has been published in total, but various fragments have been published in different papers which must have inspired the cruelest alarm. It is thus that we have learnt that in many southern counties of Ireland, there has been a count of the number of days in each barony when subsistence was in supply. For very few, the number exceeded two hundred days. For the most, it doesn't add up to one hundred and fifty. For some, it remains under twenty-five. And that is after the harvest, when there was no longer any hope of obtaining more from the land before next August!

- 43 To relieve the misery which occurs in such a disastrous situation, the English government had resorted to different means. First it organized a vast system of general works, such as roads, canals, etc. which, by occupying thousands of workers, brings their families means of existence. Then, foreseeing the immensity of the demands which would be placed on the workhouses, that is the establishments which welcome & nourish the poor, on the charitable institutions which distribute food to the indigent, the government undertook to supply these charitable institutions with grain which it had bought abroad or in English warehouses, and which it is selling at cost price, that is to say at a much better price than these institutions could themselves obtain. It employs for this end, as it is known; a great number of steamships and ships of the Royal Navy, some of which have even been taken to the coast or the rivers of the country to serve as permanent food depots. In addition, committees in each barony vote and spread out the poor tax, have constituted relief committees, and the assembly of all those in each barony of those who pay the poor tax has been authorized, no, invited to vote works of general interest whose costs, advanced by the government, will be reimbursed by the landowners according to their contribution to the poor law duties. Finally, and lastly, the government has been allowed to make advances of moneys to all landowners (and it is well known that there are immense domains in Ireland), for those who wishing to improve their lands with important works, will offer the government sufficient guarantee for reimbursement. To legalize the general works demanded by the baronies or the landlords, they only need to have been authorized by a special administration, rapidly organized, and which must deliver its decision within a few weeks, and have already agreed to the use of a sum of more than 20 million francs, and organized work which will employ sixty thousand workers. This is proof of a praiseworthy activity, since the cost of these works submitted for financing only cost between 25,000 and 30,000 francs, and before authorizing them, engineers have to be dispatched to the site to check whether the works voted by men who

are strangers to the job, are in fact possible. This temporary administration is called the board of works.

- 44 That is what the government has done. On the other hand, private charity has been moved, a great number of landlords have returned a part or the whole of the rents received, others have gone further, they have bought on their own initiative considerable quantities of grain which they resell at cost price, others again, like the Marquess of Abercorn, freely distribute food to the poor in their neighbourhood. Certainly all these resources present an important relief effort which should soften much suffering, but one has to recognize, in the current situation of poor Ireland, these are only palliatives. It is in fact, at least 250 million francs, which are needed, according to the most moderate estimates, to make up the deficit in the potato crop. How much therefore will all the food cost? And what can the imperfect wisdom of men, their limited power and goodwill, do other than bring palliatives to this abysmal pains called Ireland, in this chain of misery which one after the other befall Ireland with fatal logic. It is not an easy thing to come to the relief of Ireland, and before being able to get to the origin, one has to go through the preliminaries, make expenses and efforts which one would not even suspect in other countries. Who would believe for example that when the Marquess of Abercorn began distributing free grain to the poor, his goodwill was rendered not useless, but very much less useful, since there was no mill to grind it with? He had to have one brought over from England. And what happened in this locality is happening all over Ireland, as numerous places have had to have mills installed, since Ireland being a place where most men never eat bread, what need have they for mills?
- 45 Thus, in spite of everything the government has done, in spite of the good will of such a number of generous landowners giving the example, do we read of new appalling and deplorable news in the Irish newspapers. Here a family has been found dead in its miserable hut, having sold or pawned down to the rags covering their nudity; there a father who dies worn out with need, a shovel in his hand, on the work he was employed for; elsewhere, a riot of people who want to stop grain from leaving the country, and blood shed; elsewhere again, a landlord who is assassinated, a farmer's horses are killed as he is suspected of wanting to take his harvest to market in the nearby town; it is a troop of men in rags, but armed, who come on Sunday to placard on the walls of the church a proclamation full of death threats to those who pay their rent to the landlord, and so that no one can argue ignorance, armed sentinels watch all day over this manifesto and prevent it from being taken down.
- 46 What to do then? There is no lack of people willing to give advice, but the advice they give is impractical. To take only the least unreasonable, some ask the government to buy grain abroad, sell it at cost price, and thus keep subsistence at a modest rate; others, that the government pay all indigent people, all people without work, and ensure that they and their families have means of existence. But in the first case, what effect would there be on foreign markets if it was learnt suddenly that the English government had undertaken to provide food for more than six months of the year to a famished population of eight million men? Wouldn't it lead to a rise in prices which would defy British wealth? And what is done in Ireland would have to be done in England itself, which too has suffered in the cereal harvest, to a deficit of at least 2 500 000 quarters (more than 7 million hectoliters)? Shouldn't one have to do the same for the Highlands and Islands in Scotland where a population of perhaps one million men is suffering anguish almost as terrible as in Ireland? As for the second proposal, it is just as

impractical, applied as it would have to be to innumerable masses of men, and the security that a salary offered by the government would take them away from agriculture, that is to say truly productive work, to leave them, at the time of the next harvest, in a situation just as bad as that in which they find themselves at the moment?

- 47 Who should one believe? The extravagant proposals have found favour not only among the little enlightened classes, but even among people whom one would have supposed to be better enlightened. It is to respond to these improbable demands, that the Prime Minister, Lord John Russell, whose sympathies for Ireland are well known, felt obliged to write the following letter to the Duke of Leinster¹⁵, Chairman of the Irish Agricultural Society:
- 48 [The Letter, given in full in the text, advocated that it was public works, especially drainage, that were to constitute the main form of famine relief].
- 49 It must be recognized that the minister is right, and that, if one can attribute without injustice, a part, a large part of the ills which Ireland is suffering from today to the cruel fate that the English conquest subjected it to, it is also right to admit that the government is doing almost everything it can do to soften these appalling miseries whose excess humiliates the pride and diminishes the power of the country which has caused them.
- 50 *Journal des Débats politiques et littéraires*, 7th November 1846.
- 51 Translated by SF.

NOTES

1. The complete series from the Restoration in 1814 to the Liberation in 1944 is available on the French national library website Gallica.
2. La lecture au jour le jour : les quotidiens à l'âge d'or de la presse, BNF, <http://classes.bnf.fr/rendezvous/pdf/Fiche-presse1.pdf>, consulted on 17 February 2015.
3. For *The Times*, see Christophe Gillissen's contribution to this issue 'The Times and the Great Irish Famine, 1846-47'.
4. David Brown, *Palmerston and the Politics of Foreign Policy, 1846-55*, Manchester, MUP, 2003, p.30; D. Brown, "Morally transforming the world or spinning a line? Politicians and the newspaper press in mid-nineteenth century Britain", *Historical Research*, May 2010, p.230; Laurence Fenton, *Palmerston and the Times. Foreign Policy, the Press and Public Opinion*, London, Tauris, 2012, p.35.
5. E. Labrousse, *Aspects de la crise et de la dépression de l'économie française au milieu du XIXe siècle*, La Roche sur Yon, 1956 ; Georges Dupeux, *Aspects de l'histoire politique du Loir-et-Cher, 1848-1914*, Paris, 1962 ; André Thuillier, *Economie et société nivernaises au début du XIXe siècle*, Paris, Ecole des Hautes Etudes, Mouton & Co., 1974, Ch. 3 Les crises des subsistances 1846-1847 ; Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *Histoire humaine et comparée du climat*, vol. 2, *Disettes et révolutions, 1740-1860*, Paris, Fayard, 2006.
6. *Le Journal des Débats*, 18th September 1846.
7. It has not been possible to identify this publication, either an Irish provincial or an American (Boston or Maryland) paper.

8. See Paul Thomas Murphy, *Shooting Victoria. Madness, Mayhem, and the Rebirth of the British Monarchy*, Londres, Pegasus, 2013.
9. *Journal des Débats*, 3rd October 1843.
10. "La Quittance de Minuit. Prologue. Les Molly-Maguire. I. Repas irlandais".
11. See above footnote 3.
12. The De Vesci family papers including stock and crop reports and letters to the estate agent in Ireland at the time of the famine are held by the National Library of Ireland.
13. See above footnote 3..
14. The two powers were vying for influence in South America, in the Iberian peninsula, in North Africa, and the Napoleonic wars and blockades were not long over. For an insight into later developments in Franco-British Mediterranean and Middle Eastern rivalry see Luc Chantre, *Le pèlerinage à La Mecque à l'époque coloniale 1866-1940. France-Grande Bretagne-Italie*. Thèse soutenue le 19 octobre 2012, à l'Université de Poitiers, sous la direction de Jérôme Grévy.
15. Leader of the Irish Whigs, Lord Justice of Ireland at the time of the Famine. His papers are kept in the Northern Ireland Public Record Office (PRONI): http://www.proni.gov.uk/introduction__leinster_papers_d3078-2.pdf.
-

ABSTRACTS

This paper looks at how the politically orthodox *Journal des Débats politiques et littéraires*, close to governmental circles in France, perceived and reported on issues concerning Ireland in the critical years 1846 and 1847. Its sources of information were the English and Irish press, and the columns of its pages reveal sympathy both for the British government – with the emphasis placed heavily on lessons to be learnt on how to avoid social unrest in times of dearth – but also for the (Catholic) Irish people suffering at the hands of fate in a situation engendered by English colonialism: wrought by God, abetted by the English.

INDEX

Geographical index: France, Britain, Ireland, England

Keywords: famine, relief, social unrest, Corn Laws, free trade, Repeal, Young Ireland

Chronological index: 19th century, 1846-1847

AUTHOR

SUSAN FINDING

Susan Finding is Professor of British Studies at the University of Poitiers and Fellow of the Royal Historical Society. She has published widely on 19th and 20th century British political and social history and edited or co-edited *Unfinished business : Devolution in the UK*, Bordeaux, Presses universitaires de Bordeaux, 2011 with Moya Jones and Philippe Cauvet; *Keeping the lid on, Urban eruptions and social control*, Newcastle, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010, with Logie Barrow

and François Poirier; and *L'abolition de l'esclavage au Royaume-Uni 1787-1840: débats et dissensions*, Paris, Armand Colin, 2009.