

# *The Famine and the Catholic Church: a review article*

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By Thomas McGrath

**'A Nation of Beggars'? Priests, People and Politics in Famine Ireland 1846-1852.** By Donal A. Kerr (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1994). 370 pp. Stg £40.00. – In 1982 Professor Kerr published *Peel, Priests and Politics*, a magisterial study of the relationship between the government of the Tory prime minister Sir Robert Peel and the Irish Catholic Church in the period 1841-1846. This book is an important continuation of that work, marked by Kerr's hallmark of judicious and fairminded scholarship. It is a thorough survey of the relationship between the British government during Lord John Russell's Whig administration of 1846-1852 and the Irish Catholic Church.

Inevitably therefore its themes are the Great Famine, the repeal movement and the Young Ireland 1848 rebellion, the Queen's Colleges controversy, Russell's idea of state payment of the Catholic clergy, the Synod of Thurles and the Ecclesiastical Titles Bill. All are covered with skill and authority by Dr. Kerr who, until his recent retirement, was Professor of Ecclesiastical History at St. Patrick's College, Maynooth.

In the long and inglorious history of Anglo-Irish relations no chapter exposes the brutal realities of that relationship with such stark clarity as the Great Famine. What this book illustrates above all else is how the tragic misunderstanding of centuries between England and Ireland contributed significantly to the number of famine dead. Ethnic and sectarian tensions reaching a climax in the 1840s seriously exacerbated a prevailing unwillingness to do much for the Irish at their time of greatest crisis. This proved Daniel O'Connell's contention that, although Ireland was part of the union from 1801, the union was largely meaningless when Ireland's needs came to predominate.

This book takes its title from a remark of the archbishop of Cashel and Emly, Michael Slattery, to Laurence Ranehan, president of Maynooth College, in June 1847, that the system of relief an incapable government had inflicted on the country had created "a Nation of Beggars". Even the cautious Slattery could write of "the Extermination going on under the protection of the law". Dr. Kerr indicts the British government for washing its hands of financial responsibility for famine relief from mid-1847 to the end of the disaster in 1850.

The revisionist view of the famine as exemplified in Dudley Edwards's and Desmond Williams's *The Great Famine, Studies in Irish History 1845-52* (Dublin, 1956) minimised government responsibility for the famine and diluted the severity of the suffering of the famine victims. This approach has been well and truly undermined, as all the leading young historians without exception revert to what might be called a traditional interpretation. Kerr joins the consensus among historians such as James S. Donnelly Jnr., Peter Gray, Christine Kinealy, Joel Mokyr, Cormac Ó Gráda and Kevin Whelan, which maintains that the British state cannot be absolved of all responsibility for the deaths of one million of its citizens and the forced emigration of another million.

Lord John Russell as prime minister emerges from this study as a weak political leader, full of goodwill and ill-advised schemes for Ireland's improvement, including above all others an



idealistic attachment to the idea of the state payment of the Catholic clergy. This was a notion which had no chance of success in the contemporary *zeitgeist*, but which dominated Russell's Irish policy for years. To move from such a position to the Ecclesiastical Titles Bill amidst a sectarian explosion suggests blatant political opportunism and is a reflection of just how naive and unrealistic state payment of the Catholic clergy was in the first place.

While Russell was highly critical of landlord conduct during the unprecedented and extraordinary mass evictions of the later famine years, which were a by-product of his government's Irish policy, he was unable to do anything to save lives. He was incapable of controlling his own cabinet, where the Home Secretary, Sir George Grey, the Secretary for War, Earl Grey, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Charles Wood, the Foreign Secretary, Lord Palmerston, and the Postmaster-General, Lord Clanricarde, amongst others, displayed an ignorance of Irish realities and contempt for the Irish untempered by any real sympathy for their plight. Likewise the devious Lord Clarendon, Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, and the unrelenting Charles Trevelyan, Under-Secretary to the Treasury, were not notable for their consideration for the Irish.

How did the Catholic Church react to the famine? Dr. Kerr's chapter on this question is entitled "The Hecatombe and the Church's silence?". Individually the response of the Catholic clergy to the outbreak of the famine was to do all they could for their parishioners. They worked (as one pro-government source, Thomas Spring Rice, Lord Monteagle, stated) like "tigers" to defend their flocks from starvation, trying every stratagem they could think of to prevent the worst. The clergy could hardly credit Russell's change in August 1846 from Peel's policy of limited state intervention to one of *laissez faire* and they petitioned government for redress, but to no avail.

Parish priests sat on relief committees and did all in their power to counteract the apparent indifference of the state. They often sat on these committees alongside Protestant rectors, although as the famine wore on some campaigning proselytism inhibited good relations in certain parts of the country, notably Connemara, Galway and Kerry, and left an ugly after-taste. The Catholic clergy worked hard during the famine; there were many among their parishioners who foresaw immediate death as inevitable and consequently crowded to church services such as the "stations" to prepare for the end.

Priests were on constant call from one end of their parishes to the other in response to daily calls to the dying. Many clergy of both denominations (at least 40 priests) died from famine fever contracted in the course of carrying out their duty. The state's policy on the famine made the Catholic clergy increasingly bitter. Paul Cullen's uncle, the Kildare and Leighlin priest, Rev. James Maher, commented (on 4 December 1847) on the dilemma facing the clergy that "if they raise their voice against oppression they run the risk of being accused of exciting to murder".

The Catholic clergy, who made valiant efforts to prevent outrages during the famine, suffered the indignity in the British press, notably in *The Times*, of being blamed for inciting violence in Ireland. In the House of Lords, Lord Farnham accused the Roscommon parish priest, Rev. Michael McDermott, of inciting the murder of Major Denis Mahon of Strokestown House on 2 November 1847. The English Catholic nobleman, Lord Shrewsbury, wanted to see clerics such as Archdeacon Laffan of Fethard disciplined for his fiery denunciation of Britain's famine policy. Most, though not all, were constrained in their angry denunciations of government policy by the fear of prodding their flocks into violent rebellion which they invariably, as in 1848, did much to restrain.

How did the Catholic hierarchy respond to the famine? They were cautious to the point of timidity, and collectively were slow to act. There was no tradition of speaking out as one on



social issues, and in any case they were sharply divided among themselves. This division dated back to 1838, when Archbishop MacHale of Tuam denounced the state-sponsored system of national education even though his episcopal colleague, Archbishop Murray of Dublin, sat on the Board of National Education. Before too long an episcopal controversy had escalated to the stage where both Catholic archbishops were writing long letters against one another in the press.

In the 1840s MacHale led opposition to Peel's reforms, which were intended to be pro-Catholic. He was joined by Slattery of Cashel, and they lined up against Murray of Dublin and Croll of Armagh who were inclined to accept the good faith of government. For their pains the latter were denounced as "Castle bishops". MacHale was pro-repeal and had so often denounced government policy in Ireland that his accurate forecasts of the famine did not carry any weight in official circles. Thus when MacHale lambasted Russell's new departure in August 1846 with the words, "You might as well at once issue an edict of general starvation", he was prescient; but no one in power paid much attention to him. In their own dioceses bishops did as much as they could. It should be noted that Anglican bishops in English dioceses sent funds to their Irish counterparts.

Voluntary agencies did good work during the famine and Irish emigrants contributed generously. The British Association in London and the important early work of the Society of Friends are well known examples. Queen Victoria issued a Queen's letter early in 1847 calling for English support for the Irish which received a good response; a second Queen's letter later in 1847 was a failure. The Catholic world was sympathetic to the well-known travails of Irish Catholics and well-disposed to be responsive during the famine. Money poured into Archbishop Murray of Dublin from Catholics overseas as the scale of the famine was publicised.

In March 1847 Pope Pius IX issued an encyclical to the universal church calling for prayers and financial relief for Ireland. Catholic bishops throughout Europe and the world, but especially in France and America, responded enthusiastically by, for example, foregoing their Lenten collections for Ireland. The Irish bishops disagreed on how this money should be distributed. Archbishops Murray and Croll wanted to give these moneys to the Central Relief Committee in Dublin, an interdenominational body, whereas Archbishops MacHale and Slattery insisted that funds subscribed by Catholics for Irish Catholics should be directed straight to the bishops in the dioceses which needed them for distribution to the parishes. The latter view prevailed.

In October 1847 the bishops finally published a stinging collective statement challenging English views of the Irish, asserting the right to life as superior to property rights, and denouncing the government's policy on the famine in the strongest manner. The arrival of Paul Cullen from Rome as archbishop of Armagh and papal legate to the Synod of Thurles decisively tilted the hierarchy towards the MacHale-Slattery axis, defeating Murray's party – though the latter staged a dogged rearguard action.

Cullen wrote to Rome that the question to be decided was "whether the Pope ought to rule the Church in Ireland through the majority of the bishops, or whether, on the other hand, the English government ought to rule it by means of the archbishop of Dublin". Murray, states Kerr (p. 308), was suspected of being "too trusting and compliant" in his relations with the government. Interestingly, Kerr notes (p. 308 fn.) that there are hardly any letters documenting Murray's contacts with the government in the Dublin Diocesan Archives. When Murray died in 1852 Cullen became archbishop of Dublin and his and Rome's victory was complete.

The early 1850s was an exceptionally bad period for interdenominational relations in Ireland.



The strongly anti-Catholic Clarendon denounced the "mummers of Thurles" for upsetting government plans for the Queen's Colleges by insisting on a Catholic university. In England the re-establishment of the Catholic hierarchy in 1850 led to Archbishop Wiseman's injudicious pastoral "Out of the Flaminian Gate". The perceived "papal aggression" sent English Protestants into paroxysms of anger and gave Lord John Russell (despite belonging to a party which propounded religious liberty) the opportunity to denounce Catholic practices as "the mummeries of superstition", a statement which was hugely counter-productive in Ireland. Amidst the degenerate politics of intense sectarianism the penal Ecclesiastical Titles Bill was passed despite the efforts of "the Irish Brigade" or as their opponents called them "the Pope's Brass Band".

Dr. Kerr is a master of his craft. He writes with an admirable disinterested equanimity and balance. As usual he demonstrates not just a deep knowledge of the British context but also of the continental European, particularly the Italian and French, dimension. As in his previous work, on Peel, his understanding and re-appraisal of Lord John Russell is of the highest quality. The Dublin-London-Rome triangle is well covered. Throughout the nineteenth century the Irish Catholic hierarchy were always fearful that Rome, under British influence, could not be trusted to pronounce in the best interests, as they saw it, of the Irish Church.

Careful proof-reading would have eliminated some dating and geographical mistakes. O'Connell's Clontarf meeting was scheduled for October, not September, 1843 (p. 2). In 1848 Haly, not Walshe (p. 107), was bishop of Kildare and Leighlin. The parishes of Carrick-on-Suir and Puckane in County Tipperary have both been alienated from the county – in the former case (p. 134) to County Waterford and in the latter (p. 143) to County Clare. Mitchel was transported in the first instance to Bermuda, not Van Diemen's Land (pp. 143, 145) in 1848. Corcoran, not Cahill, was parish priest of Mullinahone (p. 161) in 1848. In the index (p. 361) this error is compounded; Cahill has become the Rev. D. W. Cahill, the well-known contemporary polemicist; James Maher's parish was not Graiguenamanagh (p. 186) but Carlow-Graigue. However, these are minor errors which do not detract from the overall significance of this distinguished work.

In 1996 the Columba Press, Dublin, published Dr. Kerr's work **The Catholic Church and the Famine** (price £5.99), which deals with the themes raised above, utilising priests' letters to give eye-witness accounts of the famine. This work is an interesting and useful 96-page monograph aimed at a popular audience.