

hunger! The hunger!" grew ever weaker as they took on the emaciated, ragworn look of century-old dolls.

"Look there, sir, you can't tell whether they are boys or girls," said an Irish physician to the visitor accompanying him into a cottier's cabin in County Cork in 1847. Taking up a skeleton child, he added, "Here is the way it is with them all; their legs swing and rock like the legs of a doll. They have the smell of mice." After they had seen a great number of these "miserable objects," the doctor said, "Now, sir, there is not a child you saw can live a month, every one of them is in famine fever, a fever so sticking that it never leaves them."<sup>11</sup>

The staring eyes of these children told the story, the unbelievable, incomprehensible story of an entire population, under the protection and dominion of Great Britain, whose shoreline was little more than a day's sail away, starving to death while their own country's produce, cattle, and wheat, oats, and barley were being shipped in British bottoms to British ports. During the winter of 1846-47 alone, while over 400,000 persons were dying of famine or famine-related disease, the British government, instead of prohibiting the removal of Irish food from Ireland, allowed seventeen million pounds sterling worth of grain, cattle, pigs, flour, eggs, and poultry to be shipped to England—enough food to feed, at least during these crucial winter months, twice the almost six million men, women, and children who composed the tenant-farmer and farm-laborer population. Even farmers with the grass of thirty cows were suffering; shopkeepers and others in town were contemplating going out of business. Incredible as it may seem today that such shipments from a famine-racked country were allowed, how much more incredible was it then that Irishmen with starving families were expected by the British to watch and be resigned to the shipments made.

At the same time, to make matters worse for the Irish and even better for what *The Nation* called "British Commercial Christianity," no relief food could be shipped to Irish ports,

from whatever country, except in British ships. Even the charity of other nations had to be turned to a profit by Great Britain, whose Irish subjects had been paying taxes to the British treasury ever since the so-called union with Britain in 1800.<sup>12</sup>

When Lord George Bentinck spoke in the House of Lords on March 22, 1847 of "the ravages made in Ireland by famine and disease . . . and attributed many of the deaths which had occurred there to the neglect of the government to find food and employment for the people," Mr. Labouchere, the Irish secretary, protested in defense of the government against the assumption that the loss of human life, which had unfortunately taken place in Ireland, was to be attributed to Her Majesty's government. Every day's experience convinced him "that the Government had pursued a wise policy in not interfering with the supply of food to Ireland in any way which could compete with the efforts of private traders. . . ."<sup>13</sup>

This "wise policy" was better known as England's "political economy," one of whose most fundamental laissez-faire doctrines was that "there must be no interference with the natural course of trade." The starvation in Ireland, in short, could in no way interfere with the shipping of that country's abundant crops of grain and herds of cattle to England. The traders and speculators had to realize a profit, the landlords had to be paid their rents, the agents their commissions, and the only way to accomplish these essentials of political economy was to carry on business as usual—that is, as though no one had died or was dying of starvation in Ireland. In fact, when private relief committees and charitable organizations in Ireland showed a willingness to buy grain to feed the starving (even at famine-inflated prices), some of the previously exported grain was shipped back to Ireland, laden with merchants' profits and the cost of being shipped twice in British bottoms, for no other reason than that there was to be "no interference with the natural course of trade."<sup>14</sup>

Lord Bentinck rebutted the Irish secretary in these words:

This political economy of non-interference with the import and retail trade may be good in ordinary times, but in times such as the present, when a calamity unexampled in the history of the world has suddenly fallen upon Ireland—when there are no merchants or retailers in the whole of the west—when a country of which the population has been accustomed to live upon potatoes of their own growth, produced within a few yards of their own doors, is suddenly deprived of this, the only food of the people, it was not reasonable to suppose that, suddenly merchants and retailers would spring up to supply the extraordinary demands of the people for food. Therefore, I should say that this was a time when Her Majesty's Ministers should have broken through these, the severe rules of political economy, and should, themselves, have found the means of providing the people of Ireland with food. . . .

When, every day, we hear of persons being starved to death, and when the [Irish secretary] himself admits that in many parts of the country the population has been decimated, I cannot say, that I think ministers have done all they might have done to avert the fatal consequences of this famine. . . . At this moment, we know that there are between 300,000 and 400,000 quarters of corn in stock on hand in the different ports of London, Liverpool and Glasgow. I want to know, then, what was to have prevented ministers from sending any part, or all of this food to the west of Ireland, to feed the starving people there? . . . It would have kept the retailers and forestallers in order, and prevented them from availing themselves of the Famine to obtain undue prices. What do we see with regard to Indian meal? Why Indian meal is, at this moment, selling in New York at three shillings, and at Liverpool and in Ireland at nine shillings per bushel.<sup>15</sup>

Even grain that remained in Irish bins could not be touched because in most cases it had the landlord's cross on it for the rent. In Galway, at Licknafon, a woman named Mary Driscoll, living on a small farm with her husband, father, and nine children, admitted at the inquest of her father's death that her family had been taking some of the barley, "about a barrel we had, and, God help us, we could not eat any more of the same, as the landlord put a cross on it, I mean it was marked

for the rent." So while it remained there, with the landlord's cross and keepers on it, her father, Jeremiah Hegarty, died of starvation in a nearby ditch. Rather than risk the family's eviction for failure to pay the rent, he had resisted taking any more barley to sustain himself while breaking stones for roads designed by the public works to be of benefit to no one. Had he been paid in time by the public works to buy food, as his son-in-law testified, he might have lived. But instead he was found dead in a ditch, with his stomach and the upper part of his intestine (according to a post-mortem examination conducted by one Dr. Donovan) totally devoid of food.<sup>18</sup>

Ireland possessed within herself, in her thousands of acres of wasteland, the means of her own regeneration. But the money appropriated by the English government to Ireland's public works (money paid in taxes by Ireland to the English treasury) was not used to reclaim this uncultivated land. Instead it was spent on labor that the law decreed had to be unproductive—that is, on the construction of bridges and piers having no purpose or necessity and on roads that began where there was no need for them and led to nowhere in particular. Some of these monuments to the wisdom of the British government are still to be seen in various parts of Ireland—roads frequented now only by the daisy and the harebell, bridges where no rivers flow, and piers where ships are never seen.

The suffering, hunger, and wretchedness that had made the very name "Ireland" a universal synonym for poverty, disease, and humiliation had by now eaten into the souls of Irish intellectuals, who loved their country and its people with a passion equaled only by the enmity they felt toward England and the English. One such was John Mitchel, a fiery Irishman with a peculiar, distinctive character not unlike that of his archenemies on the editorial staff of the *London Times*. Indefatigable, fearless, determined, and gifted with a fine analytical mind, Mitchel wrote for *The Nation*, a leading Irish journal that became during these years a thorn in England's side. In response to the alarming number of deaths from starvation, Mitchel said in an editorial:



England takes away every year fifteen millions' worth of our produce; and of that store English merchants send in English ships a large quantity to their colonies . . . set down as "British produce and manufactures." "British produce" means *Irish* produce. In grain and cattle, England is not an exporting but an importing country; she has nothing of that sort to spare; and whatever provisions she sends to her colonies must be first brought into England from some other country. And when we remember that fifteen millions' worth of corn and cattle leaves our shores for England every year, we can be at no loss to conjecture whence this "produce" goes to [the colonies]. . . .

The rock of Gibraltar grows no corn, but the County of Cork does; and such is the admirable working of the Union [between England and Ireland] and the colonial system between them, that the garrison and citizens of Gibraltar live well, and feed abundantly, and care no more for the potato-rot than they do for a deficient date crop in Arabia, while in the County of Cork, in a place there called Skibbereen, families of men, women and children, are lying in heaps in the corners of mud hovels, some dead, and some alive, but the living "unable from weakness to move either themselves or the corpses". . . . Nay, the more exact and logical statement of this matter would be, that Skibbereen starves, and raves, and dies, *in order* that Gibraltar and St. Helena, and the rest of them, may be kept in good condition to support garrisons, and victual cruisers, and maintain the naval power of Great Britain in all the ends of the earth.<sup>17</sup>

The crisis, in this late fall of 1846, was of such a magnitude that the British government had to act with all the speed, power, and money at its command if it was to save the lives of hundreds of thousands of its subjects. Prime Minister Lord John Russell correctly called it a thirteenth-century famine affecting a nineteenth-century population, and, as the evidence will show, his government's response constitutes the blackest chapter in the history of Great Britain.