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## Russell and the revolutionaries: A study of Anglo-Irish relations, 1842-1852

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RUSSELL AND THE REVOLUTIONARIES  
A STUDY OF ANGLO-IRISH RELATIONS,  
1842-1852

A Thesis  
Presented to the  
Department of History  
and the  
Faculty of the Graduate College  
University of Nebraska at Omaha

In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts

by  
Barry B. Combs

June 1970

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Accepted for the faculty of The Graduate College of the  
University of Nebraska at Omaha, in partial fulfillment of the  
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## PREFACE

Perhaps no time in the history of Anglo-Irish relations has brought more criticism on a British administration than the period of the great famine of 1846-50. The man most responsible for British policy during those years, Lord John Russell, has been accused of having only a superficial interest in the well-being of millions of Irish people, and it has been said that his actions were motivated primarily by political considerations. At the same time, the period is marked by an apparent complete failure of Irish leadership, beginning with the declining influence of Daniel O'Connell and the Repeal Association after 1843, and typified by a group of idealistic young men known as "Young Ireland." This study will examine the interaction between the Irish leaders and Russell's administration, the attitudes that prevailed on both sides of St. George's Channel and suggest how those attitudes contributed to the succeeding relationship of England and Ireland.

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## INTRODUCTION

In 1843 Ireland was an ideal place for civil ferment. Somewhere between a third and two-fifths of the population lived in destitution. Nearly half existed in the meanest type of house--a mud hut with one room,<sup>1</sup> and a parliamentary commission of inquiry estimated that one out of every four or five workers in Ireland was without a job.<sup>2</sup>

The rising young politician, Benjamin Disraeli, asserted that Ireland's people were packed more tightly together than those of any other European country. Moreover, in terms of souls per acre of arable land, the young Conservative judged the Irish to be more crowded than even China's millions.<sup>3</sup> In fact, those Irishmen who labored on the land had precious little to rely on. More than a third made do with less than eight acres for support of their families; many tilled less than one. No less than 192,368 families would have to be "removed" in

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<sup>1</sup>J. H. Whyte, The Independent Irish Party: 1850-9 (London: Oxford University Press, 1958), p. 2.

<sup>2</sup>Great Britain, Parliament, Parliamentary Papers (House of Commons) 1845, Vol. XIX, "Report of Her Majesty's Commissioners of Inquiry into the State of the Law and Practice in Respect to the Occupation of Land in Ireland," p. 9. Cited hereafter as Devon Commission.

<sup>3</sup>Great Britain, Parliament, Hansard's Parliamentary Debates, 3d ser., Vol. 89 (1847), p. 1416. Cited hereafter as Hansard.



order that the small holdings might be consolidated so that none would be smaller than the believed minimum necessary size of eight acres.<sup>4</sup>

Facts and statistics regarding the Irish situation in 1843 reveal only the surface of the problem. Beneath lay a deep and lasting disaffection, a centuries-old alienation between Irishman and Englishman that sprang from real and imagined civil, religious and economic wrongs reaching back to the time of Henry II (1154-89).

In the early part of the Nineteenth Century Englishmen began to take a fresh look at the so-called Irish Problem armed with a new-found faith in science and supposedly unchangeable economic laws. The spirit of reform was rampant and most felt that, with sufficient study and the careful application of "sound economic principles," any problem could be solved. Between 1810 and 1833 Parliament appointed no less than 114 commissions and 60 select committees to investigate and report on matters relating to Ireland.<sup>5</sup>

No more thorough attempt at improvement in Ireland was made than that which stemmed from a commission headed by the Earl of Devon in 1843. When it reported in 1845, the Devon Commission had interviewed more than 1,100 witnesses living in more than 90 towns,<sup>6</sup> with the report filling fourteen volumes on the subject of land use and practices in Ireland. This problem, the commissioners felt, was at the root of Irish unrest. The island was almost exclusively agricultural, and:

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<sup>4</sup>John Mitchel, Jail Journal or, Five Years in British Prisons (Glasgow: Cameron & Ferguson, [1876]), p. 15, citing Devon Commission.

<sup>5</sup>Sir Llewellyn Woodward, The Age of Reform: 1816-1870 (2nd ed.; Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1962), p. 335.

<sup>6</sup>Devon Commission, p. 5.

The foundation of almost all the evils by which the social condition of Ireland is disturbed, is to be traced to those feelings of mutual distrust, which too often separate the classes of landlord and tenant, and prevent all united exertion for the common good.<sup>7</sup>

In retrospect, and with great care, the commission outlined the events which had contributed to the creation of the troubled agricultural scene in Ireland. Confiscations of vast areas of the land, plus colonization policies under Elizabeth and James I had resulted in large tracts of Irish land being held by absentee landlords who rarely visited the island, nor apparently cared much about its development. Under the Commonwealth and Protectorate many adventurers and supporters of Cromwell had been repaid through further confiscation. During the Eighteenth Century Penal Laws had been adopted which "interfered with almost every mode of dealing with landed property by those who professed that [Catholic] religion, and by creating a feeling of insecurity, directly checked their industry." Although anti-Catholic restrictions were relaxed, in stages, after 1771 other legislation of the period encouraged the development of a system of middlemen, often called overseers, who sublet the land to tenants, and, in fact, encouraged the division of the land to the point where it could no longer support the population in periods of economic distress.<sup>8</sup>

Hardest hit were the agricultural workers who made up the great bulk of the population and had made the least progress. "The agricultural worker is still badly housed, badly fed, badly clothed,

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 44.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., pp. 7-8.

and badly paid for his labour." In no other European country could such hardship be found.<sup>9</sup>

The Devon Commission pointed out that land was held and worked differently in Ireland than in either England or Scotland. Peculiar to Ireland was the tenant farmer's almost complete lack of security. Even in Ulster the tenant could build up an interest in the land he worked and then sell it. In England houses, barns and fences were provided by the landlord. In Ireland they were not, and if the tenant chose to provide them for himself he could claim no ownership, nor realize any return. Most Irish tenants could be evicted almost without warning and this insecurity discouraged their desire to improve the land.<sup>10</sup> Thus one of the major recommendations of the commission was that legislation be enacted immediately to guarantee the tenant some compensation for his improvements.<sup>11</sup> It was not.

Evictions were common. Landlords who found their holdings overpopulated and overfarmed to provide food for too many mouths simply cleared the land. This process had begun in earnest shortly after the fall in agricultural prices in 1815. As a result many died of starvation.<sup>12</sup>

The Irish were not passive victims of this wholesale eviction. Violence increased, secret societies were formed to seek revenge on evicting landlords. They took on cryptic names. Whitefoot, Blackfeet, Terryalts, Lady Clares, Molly Maguires and Rockites gradually merged

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<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., pp.12-16.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 19.

and by 1840 most terrorist activity was joined in the dreaded Ribbon Society.<sup>13</sup>

Of more sweeping significance was the work of Daniel O'Connell who, through the massive peaceful demonstrations by his Catholic Association and his own election to Parliament, had forced the Catholic Emancipation Act of 1829 granting the vote and the right to sit in Parliament to Catholics.<sup>14</sup> An interlude of relative quiet followed as O'Connell, the recognized leader of the great mass of Catholic Irish peasants, attempted to gain reform through an alliance with the Whig administrations of Grey and Melbourne. Failing this, and with the Whigs out of office in 1841, O'Connell turned again to mass demonstrations to achieve his end. This time his target was the Act of Union itself. Ireland and England had been joined, in name at least, in 1801. The legislative wants and needs of Irishmen were to be met at Westminster. That they had not been was the driving force that supported O'Connell's new Catholic Repeal Association. Its main goals, met with a rising chorus of approval at meeting after meeting, were repeal of the Act of Union itself and the establishment of an Irish legislature in Dublin. Irish laws made by Irishmen could then guarantee tenant farmers security; commerce and culture would thrive. The hated established Church of Ireland could then be disestablished. Still, O'Connell took care to emphasize that Ireland would remain loyal to the

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<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 42, and Woodward, Age of Reform, pp. 333-34.

<sup>14</sup>Lawrence J. McCaffrey, Daniel O'Connell and the Repeal Year (Lexington, Ky.: University of Kentucky Press, 1966), pp. 2, 5.

Crown, and all his agitation would be peaceful.<sup>15</sup>

Peaceful intentions or not, the swelling multitudes of O'Connell's followers began to worry Ireland-watchers in the mother country. In August, 1843, O'Connell climaxed a series of mass meetings by assembling a crowd estimated at between 500,000 and 750,000 on the slopes of Tara Hill in Meath.<sup>16</sup> He and his followers determined to form a Council of 300, a kind of ad hoc national assembly harking back to the old Irish Parliament which had also numbered 300.<sup>17</sup> He had reached the peak of his career.

While the hundreds of thousands were gathering at Tara the Devon Commission was methodically going about its task. One of the more melancholy facts developed from its labors was that Ireland contained no less than 6,290,000 acres of waste land out of a total land area of 20,856,320 acres. In a food-starved land nearly one-third was waste. However, the commission pointed out that 3,755,000 of those waste acres could be reclaimed and made to grow crops or cattle. It was, thus, one of their major recommendations that the existing modest public works program in Ireland be broadened to help put this land into use supporting the island's burgeoning population.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> McCaffrey, The Irish Question: 1800-1922 (Lexington, Ky.: University of Kentucky Press, 1968), pp. 48-49.

<sup>16</sup> Sir Charles Gavan Duffy, Young Ireland: A Fragment of Irish History: 1840-1850 (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1881), p. 346.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 330.

<sup>18</sup> Devon Commission, p. 52.

Another method of dealing with Ireland's critical population problem formed a second major recommendation of the commission. They urged that emigration be encouraged. Citing earlier studies in 1826, 1827, 1830 and 1832 urging the same remedy, the Devon investigators added a refinement of their own. Could not free land on the Canadian frontier be offered to emigrants who could also be allowed to work out their transportation?<sup>19</sup>

While mounting problems and agitation beset Ireland, other issues held the attention of Englishmen. It has often puzzled readers why the Anti-Corn-Law agitation and Chartist movement in England found no parallel in Ireland. The very fact that no significant effect was made by either in Ireland indicates the special nature of Irish problems.<sup>20</sup> A contemporary sought to explain why Chartism, at least, failed to fan Irish flames by revealing a strong personal dislike between Chartist leader Feargus O'Connor and Daniel O'Connell. Still the editor of the Repeal Association newspaper twice appealed for such a union--in vain.<sup>21</sup>

Charles Gavan Duffy, the most prolific of the many chroniclers of Ireland's troubled Forties, summarized her problems as the decade

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<sup>19</sup>Ibid., pp. 28-29.

<sup>20</sup>Kevin B. Nowlan, The Politics of Repeal (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965), p. 2.

<sup>21</sup>Duffy, Young Ireland, p. 171.

began.<sup>22</sup> There had been some progress under the Whigs, he said, particularly in the field of education where the National Schools were providing half a million children with education. But there had been a long period before when Catholics had been deprived of education and millions could neither read nor write. Of the 400-year Protestant ascendancy in Ireland he wrote, "A long monopoly of power is a feast that not only intoxicates but besots. . . . [Protestants] honestly believed themselves a superior race." Still Catholics bore the majority of the tax load.<sup>23</sup>

Duffy glumly concluded that after forty years' experience under the union with Great Britain, Ireland "was now the most ignorant and impoverished of the Christian States. . . .was sickening under a burden of paupers without hope of employment, because trade and commerce had disappeared."<sup>24</sup>

Such was the view from Irish eyes.

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<sup>22</sup>Priscilla Robertson said of Duffy's works that they ". . . tell more than anyone would want to know about the activities, conversations, differences of the Young Ireland group between 1840 and 1848." (Revolutions of 1848; A Social History [New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1952], p. 446).

<sup>23</sup>Duffy, Young Ireland, p. 144.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., pp. 142-49.

## CHAPTER I

### RUSSELL AND THE WHIGS EVALUATE THE IRISH PROBLEM

"I wish I knew what to do to help your country."  
-- Russell

In November, 1826, William Russell, older brother of Lord John, wrote from Ireland and implored him to take on Ireland as a cause. "Ireland cannot remain as she is . . . suffering, ill-used Ireland," and whoever accepted this cross would receive the "gratitude of millions, the applause of the world."<sup>1</sup> The following summer he repeated his concern, particularly for the Irish Catholics, "the oppression they undergo is dreadful."<sup>2</sup>

Whether it was from appeals such as this, from his own Irish experience, from a Whig sense of fair play, or an inherited obligation from his father's short but frustrated Irish service, Lord John Russell did make the righting of Irish wrongs a lifelong occupation. By 1826 he had already served thirteen years in Parliament and would, during the next thirteen, assume a place of leadership in Whig affairs. In 1846 he would succeed to the Prime Ministry just as the potato famine reached catastrophic proportions.

Russell had a long familiarity with Irish affairs. His father, the sixth Duke of Bedford, had served briefly under the All Talent's

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<sup>1</sup>Rollo Russell, ed., Early Correspondence of Lord John Russell, 1805-1840 (London: T. Fischer Unwin, 1913), I, 252-53.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 260-61.



ministry as viceroy (or lord lieutenant) of Ireland in 1806 and 1807 and Russell spent his thirteenth year there.<sup>3</sup> Bedford was concerned with discrimination against Irish Catholics, and indeed, his advocacy of allowing Catholics to serve in the army and as sheriffs is credited as the cause of the fall of the Talent's ministry by inciting anti-Catholic sentiment in Parliament.<sup>4</sup>

Of much more importance in forming Russell's views on Ireland was a visit made twenty-six years later. In 1833 he spent six weeks visiting Dublin, Cork and Belfast. The trip strongly impressed him, and on returning to England he set down a six-point program to relieve Irish distress. First, a strong "Government" party should be encouraged and to accomplish this both Repeal and Orange movements should be repressed. He was bothered by what he felt to be a general laxness in law enforcement; this should be rectified. He was also worried by the large numbers of people he saw "cast adrift" -- ex-tenants removed from consolidated agricultural holdings. At the same time Russell believed the problem of debt-ridden landlords must be resolved, perhaps the government could purchase their lands. His last two observations concerned religion and presaged Russell's continuing efforts to rectify that particular inequity. He suggested all three faiths--the established Church of Ireland, Catholic and Presbyterian--"ought to be provided for by the state." It might, at

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<sup>3</sup>The titles are interchangeable and are treated so with dismaying frequency by many writers on this period. The lord lieutenant was head of the Irish executive and represented the sovereign in Ireland. For a description of his duties and responsibilities see: R. B. McDowell, The Irish Administration: 1801-1914 (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1964), pp.52-77. He was also variously known as lieutenant-general, general-governor and lieutenant-governor.

<sup>4</sup>Russell, Early Correspondence, I, 16-17, 144.

at the same time, be possible to reduce the revenues of the established church, although he was rightly wary on this point.<sup>5</sup>

It is significant that at this early date Russell was already betraying a preoccupation with Irish religious inequities. In this respect he shared the common misunderstanding of most English statesmen that the basic cause of Irish discontent was religious. They were perplexed when the Catholic Relief Act of 1829 failed to reduce discontent. Still Russell was sympathetic and wrote to his friend Thomas Moore, "I can well enter into your Irish rebel sentiments. I wish I knew what to do to help your country."<sup>6</sup>

In later life Russell could look back and rationalize the failure of the Catholic Relief Act to bring the desired relief, "anyone who knows the history of national feelings must be aware that long and fatal injuries are not forgiven till after many years of conciliation and repentance."<sup>7</sup> From that same vantage he could regret England's long mistreatment of Ireland "from 1430 to 1829, during which period she did everything in her power to check the industry, to repress the manufactures, to persecute the religion, and to confiscate the rights of the Irish people."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid., II, 42-44, and Spencer Walpole, The Life of Lord John Russell (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1889), I, 195-97.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., pp. 182-83. Moore was a well known Irish poet and literary figure. His Irish Melodies (1808-34) had enjoyed great success. Russell's closeness to Moore later led him to edit Moore's eight volume Memoirs, Journals and Correspondence (1853-56).

<sup>7</sup>John Earl Russell, Recollections and Suggestions, 1813-73 (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1913), p. 344.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 350.

Still, during his active political life Russell's sympathy for Ireland brought him time and again to seek positive measures of reform. He led the successful fight in 1833 to abolish the church cess (tax) which made every Irish Catholic an unwilling contributor to the established church. He worked to broaden the availability of education and to extend the new Poor Law to Ireland, both successfully by 1839.<sup>9</sup> The following year, after five successive defeats, his efforts pressing for a reform of the Irish municipalities were finally rewarded with passage.<sup>10</sup>

Indeed it was on Russell's championing of Irish causes that the Grey-Melbourne administration came to grief in 1834. Even though a member of Grey's cabinet and aware of strong opposition within it, he had openly brought to the floor of the House of Commons the question of the distribution of the surplus revenues of the established Church of Ireland. Russell favored their application to secular purposes. Four of his fellow cabinet members resigned; one of them, Lord Stanley, complaining, "Johnny Russell has upset the coach."<sup>11</sup>

Following the passage of the Catholic Relief Act of 1829, an uneasy alliance existed between Whig England and Catholic Ireland. For the next decade O'Connell sought to work through parliamentary ways to improve his people's lot. In fact when the Whigs lost office briefly in 1834-35, O'Connell pledged his support and that of sixty other Irish members to Russell in a successful effort to defeat the Conservative govern-

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<sup>9</sup>Ibid., pp. 189-190, and Walpole, Life of Lord John Russell, I, 185-88, 190-93, 297.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 327.

<sup>11</sup>Woodward, Age of Reform, pp. 100-101, 346.

ment.<sup>12</sup> The Whigs were returned to power in April, 1835, Russell assuming the dual responsibility of Home Secretary and leader of the House.

O'Connell's Whig alliance was a fitful relationship at best, and when the Irishman increased his demands after 1840 Russell disavowed the connection. In November, 1841, he wrote Lord Lansdowne that he would listen to O'Connell but would not commit himself or his party since the Irish leader demanded adherence to Repeal as a condition of allegiance.<sup>13</sup>

O'Connell had few friends among the English Whigs and it is likely that Russell shared the general suspicion of the "Liberator's" flamboyant tactics. Nassau Senior, pioneering political economist and a kind of spokesman for the Whigs, decided O'Connell's motives were mainly self-serving. O'Connell, he said, could not honestly expect to gain Repeal without resorting to rebellion and, since the Irishman specifically rejected the use of force, he was only agitating his fellow countrymen in a hopeless cause to insure his own position of power. O'Connell opposed many Whig reform measures, and this, Senior reasoned, proved he did not really want Ireland's grievances solved. Senior condemned O'Connell as lacking honesty, taste, intellect and morality.<sup>14</sup> Such an extreme opinion of the man most Irishmen considered their leader did not bode well for a genuine understanding of Irish problems on the part of the Whigs or their own leader, Lord John Russell.

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<sup>12</sup>Russell, Early Correspondence, II, 92-93.

<sup>13</sup>George Peabody Gooch, ed., The Later Correspondence of Lord John Russell, 1840-1878 (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1925), I, 50.

<sup>14</sup>Nassau Senior, Journals, Conversations and Essays Relating to Ireland (2nd ed.; London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1868), I, 67-68, 114.

As a group, Russell's Whigs were ill-tempered to either comprehend the Irish problem or be able to solve it. The concept that the state should not interfere in economic matters except in very exceptional cases was one of the basic dogmas of Whiggery.<sup>15</sup> State support for the poor and unemployed was a dangerous policy since it tampered with the basic truths of the natural economic system. The unfortunate jobless played a necessary part in the economy since their very existence drove down wages for the employed. Besides, had not Dr. Malthus said the law of population condemned the masses to misery?<sup>16</sup>

At the same time other factors were at work alienating Englishmen from Irish problems. English working classes resented the annual influx of cheap Irish labor, while the middle class tended to look down on a nation without a comparable middle class. Intellectuals and professional men found the Irish lack of a similar cultural group cause for alienation. All abhorred what seemed a national tendency on the part of the Irish to violence and excess.<sup>17</sup>

While in England the great mass of people were in sympathy with the law, in Ireland public sympathy was with those who broke it. The common people created their own unwritten code sentencing unpopular landlords to beatings and frequently to death.<sup>18</sup> There were other differences between the two countries--enough Senior thought, to require

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<sup>15</sup>Donald Southgate, The Passing of the Whigs, 1832-1886 (London: MacMillan & Co. Ltd., 1962), p. 149.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., pp. 142-43.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 186.

<sup>18</sup>Senior, Journals, I, 33-36, 200.

different governing practices. One nation chiefly Protestant, the other Catholic; one industrious and strong, the other apathetic and weak.<sup>19</sup> Returning from a lengthy visit to Ireland Senior was convinced the Irish were indolent by nature. He had seen accumulations of filth and trash in and around their huts, had seen small gardens and potato patches choked with weeds while their owners sat in the doorway and gossiped. This lack of industry applied to the town dwellers as well where labor unions forced the abandonment of piecework and the worst laborer was paid as well as the best.<sup>20</sup>

Senior shared Russell's opinion of the root cause: religious inequities. Catholics had been legislated out of a part in society--unable to own land, hold office, work in a profession, "forbidden, in short, to be anything but the serfs of a Protestant aristocracy."<sup>21</sup>

Senior's judgment of his fellow countrymen was no less harsh, "thoughtlessness, pride, or bigotry rendered the bulk of the British people blind to their danger, and the rest ready to incur it."<sup>22</sup>

Finally, it cannot be doubted that most Englishmen were aware of inequities in Ireland and certainly Russell and the Whigs were sufficiently concerned to attempt remedial action for the problems as they saw them. But their awareness seems to have been colored by distance and personal preconceptions. Surrounded by reports of commissions and investigations they had little or no personal experience with the very real and tragic suffering that was the common, day-to-day experience of the great mass of Irish peasants. Russell had made only one significant

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<sup>19</sup>Ibid., pp. 198-200.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., pp. 43-46.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p. 34.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., pp. 17-18.

visit to the island, and that in 1833. He, himself, had not felt the ache of hunger, nor seen his neighbor ruthlessly evicted and his home destroyed, nor suffered as his children were denied an education because of his faith.<sup>23</sup>

It is remarkable and tragic that Lord John Russell and his fellow English statesmen worked so near the problem physically, yet at such a great distance in understanding.

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<sup>23</sup>Southgate, Passing of the Whigs, p. 184, and Nicholas Mansergh, The Irish Question: 1840-1921 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965), p. 50.

## CHAPTER II

### THE FOUR FUTURE REVOLUTIONARIES

"Bravo, Young Ireland!"  
-- Daniel O'Connell

After the spectacular success of his monster meeting at Tara Hill O'Connell began laying plans for an even more impressive gathering. This one would be held just outside Dublin at historic Clontarf, on October 8, 1843, and would serve as the culmination of the whole year's Repeal campaign. However, by now the British administration was genuinely alarmed despite O'Connell's protestations of pacifism. At the last minute the meeting was declared illegal and the Liberator was faced with the difficult choice of defiance or submission. Ignoring urgings from some of his younger supporters to defy the government, O'Connell chose to submit.<sup>1</sup>

Thus stopped, O'Connell never regained either his momentum or the unchallenged leadership of the earlier period. The Repeal Association had swollen in size since its founding in 1840 until, by the summer of 1843, it was claimed 50,000 men could be called together in 48 hours. William Smith O'Brien told the House of Commons the association's weekly receipts had risen from £500 to £3,000, with most of this coming from

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<sup>1</sup>Denis Gwynn, Young Ireland and 1848 (Cork: Cork University Press, 1949), pp. 14-16.



poor tenant farmers at a penny a week.<sup>2</sup>

A few days after the canceled meeting the government struck again. O'Connell and eight other Repeal leaders were arrested on charges of attempting to undermine the constitution and alienating the loyalty of British forces in Ireland.<sup>3</sup> At the time of his arrest O'Connell was sixty-eight and a new generation of younger leaders stood ready to take command if they were needed. Typical were four men destined to play a large part in the events of the next five years: Charles Gavan Duffy, 27; John Mitchel, 28; Thomas Francis Meagher, 20; and William Smith O'Brien, 41.

The first three young men gained their introduction to the Repeal movement through work on the Nation, a weekly newspaper founded by Duffy and two others, and dedicated to re-awakening a sense of patriotism and nationality in Irishmen.<sup>4</sup> The first issue came off the press October 15, 1842, and was sold out within hours.<sup>5</sup> The Nation soon became the official journal of the Repeal Association. As editor, Duffy helped formulate the policy best represented in the paper's motto: "To create and foster public opinion in Ireland and make it racy of the soil."<sup>6</sup> The Nation's formal prospectus explained that existing journals were trapped in "old habits, old prejudices." A new voice was needed to direct "the

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<sup>2</sup>Hansard, 3d. ser., Vol 70 (1843), p. 631.

<sup>3</sup>McCaffrey, Daniel O'Connell, p. 206.

<sup>4</sup>The two others were Thomas Davis and John Dillon. Although Davis was the most promising of the three he died unexpectedly in 1845.

<sup>5</sup>Duffy, Young Ireland, p. 64.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 63.

popular mind and the sympathies of educated men of all parties to the great end of Nationality." It was not to serve as a prelude to civil war, but among other things would work toward establishment of an Irish legislature.<sup>7</sup>

Duffy made a good editor. Though trained as a lawyer he turned to journalism early and had worked on two other newspapers before the Nation. He was a shrewd and accurate reporter and a good business manager, a welcome combination in the management of any newspaper. Born in Ulster, son of a shopkeeper, his "education and opinions were those of a Catholic English Radical."<sup>8</sup> He had been one of those arrested with O'Connell and one of the young men urging him not to cancel the meeting.<sup>9</sup> With O'Connell he was found guilty and sentenced; however unlike his leader, Duffy was released immediately.<sup>10</sup>

One of the most remarkable and formidable of the young writers working on the Nation was John Mitchel.<sup>11</sup> After 1845 he became the chief editorial writer and laced his articles with revolutionary attacks on the existing system. Urging agitation centered on tenant right, he preached refusal to pay rent or poor taxes. He became convinced Protestant landlords represented the greatest obstacle to the nationalist movement since

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<sup>7</sup>Prospectus reprinted in full in Ibid., p. 80.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., pp. 526-27 and Gwynn, Young Ireland, p. 5.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., pp. 14-16.

<sup>10</sup>Desmond Ryan, The Fenian Chief: A Biography of James Stephens (Coral Gables, Fla.: University of Miami Press, 1967), p. 346.

<sup>11</sup>Cecil Woodham-Smith, The Great Hunger: Ireland 1845-9 (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1962), p. 331.

they placed their property interests above national independence.<sup>12</sup> The Irish Catholic establishment fared little better under his pen: "Unfortunately for Ireland, Catholic Emancipation was carried in 1829. 'Respectable Catholics' were contented, and became West Britons from that day."<sup>13</sup> He came under the influence of the young socialist Finton Lalor and developed a strong interest in the economic roots of Ireland's problems:

When manufacturers are crushed, and a peasantry bound to the plough-tail and the cattle shed, of course the manufactured items they require must come from abroad, and their raw agricultural produce go in payment for them.<sup>14</sup>

Like Duffy, Mitchel was also a lawyer by training; unlike Duffy he was a Protestant and came from County Down.<sup>15</sup>

If Mitchel was bitter and cynical, Thomas Francis Meagher was anything but. The youngest of the four, Meagher<sup>16</sup> was the son of a successful Catholic merchant at Waterford. His father had been both mayor and member of Parliament.<sup>17</sup> Young Meagher, after completing his

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<sup>12</sup>McCaffrey, The Irish Question, pp. 67-70.

<sup>13</sup>Mitchel, Jail Journal, p. 13.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>15</sup>Ryan, The Fenian Chief, p. 356.

<sup>16</sup>"The way to pronounce his name is not, as it is generally pronounced in this country, as if it were written Meagre, but Maher, the 'a' having the same sound as in mama." (New York Herald, May 29, 1852, quoted in Robert G. Athearn, Thomas Francis Meagher: An Irish Revolutionary in America [Boulder, Colo.: University of Colorado Press, 1949], p. 29).

<sup>17</sup>Sir Charles Gavan Duffy, Four Years of Irish History: 1845-1849 (New York: Petter, Galpin & Co., n.d.), pp. 7-10.

education, returned to Ireland in 1843 and immediately joined the Repeal movement. His foppish appearance at first put off his new associates, however Meagher's earnestness and eagerness soon gained their approval and he was put to work.<sup>18</sup> On first meeting the youth O'Connell was said to have exclaimed, "Bravo, Young Ireland!" thus lending credence to one version of the origin of the name of the movement the four young men would lead.<sup>19</sup> Meagher's talents were more verbal than written although he did contribute regularly to the Nation. Addressing a crowd he was without master; he had the rare talent to electrify his listeners. Extremely intense, his "passion, poetry and imagination" could stir great emotion.<sup>20</sup> Meagher was never a leader in the councils of the young revolutionaries but his passionate oratory was to make his name famous in their movement.<sup>21</sup>

None of the first three nationalists was known outside the circle of his own friends when he joined the Repeal Association. The fourth, William Smith O'Brien, was one of the best known and most respected men of Ireland. For thirteen years he had served in Parliament, first as member for Ennis, later representing Limerick. A Protestant landowner, O'Brien inherited a long tradition of parliamentary service.<sup>22</sup> The

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<sup>18</sup>Athearn, Thomas Francis Meagher, p. 3.

<sup>19</sup>Thomas Francis Meagher, Meagher of the Sword (Dublin: M. H. Gill & Son, Ltd., 1916), pp. iv-v.

<sup>20</sup>Duffy, Four Years of Irish History, pp. 7-10.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid.

<sup>22</sup>Gwynn, Young Ireland, p. vi.

O'Briens were one of the few native Irish aristocratic families, tracing their lineage back to Brian Boru, King of North Munster (1002-1014).<sup>23</sup> To the Irishman his family name, and he himself, had historic importance.<sup>24</sup> He had a reputation for responsible leadership, firm moral qualities and a generous nature.<sup>25</sup> Duffy described him as "a man keenly sensitive to injustice."<sup>26</sup>

O'Brien worked tirelessly for the Irish cause and, by 1843, was in command of the forces of Irish liberalism in the House.<sup>27</sup> Late that same year, he joined the Repeal movement and was greeted with overwhelming enthusiasm by the crowd at Conciliation Hall--meeting place for O'Connell and his followers. His letter of application reveals his discouragement with the parliamentary system through which he had been working:

. . . reluctantly convinced that Ireland has nothing to hope from the sagacity, the justice and the generosity of the English Parliament, my reliance shall henceforth be placed upon our own native energy and patriotism.<sup>28</sup>

The arrest of O'Connell and the others may have been the final spur prompting O'Brien to cast his lot with Repeal. This is the interpretation given by most writers.<sup>29</sup> But it is more likely that his course

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<sup>23</sup>Woodham-Smith, The Great Hunger, p. 330.

<sup>24</sup>Duffy, Young Ireland, p. 89.

<sup>25</sup>Gwynn, Young Ireland, pp. 19-21.

<sup>26</sup>Duffy, Young Ireland, p. 261.

<sup>27</sup>McCaffrey, Daniel O'Connell, pp. 121-29.

<sup>28</sup>Gwynn, Young Ireland, pp. 16-17.

<sup>29</sup>See for instance Ibid., p. 14 and McCaffrey, Daniel O'Connell, p. 206.

had been decided three months earlier in the halls of Parliament. On July 4, 1843, O'Brien made a lengthy and impassioned plea for Parliament to resolve itself into committee and investigate the causes

. . . of the discontent at present prevailing in Ireland, with a view to the redress of grievances, and to the establishment of a system of just and impartial government in that part of the United Kingdom.<sup>30</sup>

So saying, O'Brien launched a five-day debate that was, at least for him, the one last chance for Parliament to prove itself capable of governing his country. "I stand here tonight to arraign the British Government and the British Parliament for having misgoverned the country to which I belong."<sup>31</sup> Despite support from Russell and the Whigs the Irish cause failed. On the fifth night of debate (July 13), at 2:30 A.M., the House divided and William Smith O'Brien's faith in a legislative solution disappeared.

In his appeal O'Brien had ranged over the entire field of Irish grievances, supporting his charges with statistics and examples. Ireland contributed more than her share of taxes and had not received her share of government spending. Catholics were still being excluded from government office. Ireland was not fairly represented in Commons. On the basis of population she should have had 200 members. She had only 105. The result was obvious:

"In England the Government bends at once to the voice of public opinion, as spoken by a majority of the English representatives; but it is enabled to defy the opinion of Ireland, as expressed by its members in Parliament, in consequence of the paucity of their number."<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup>Hansard, 3d. ser., Vol. 70 (1843), pp. 630-31.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., p. 631.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., p. 647.

It was unfair, O'Brien continued, that the government should continue support of the established church which served a little more than 10 per cent of the people. Irish municipalities had still not received the same reforms as English. The new poor law had been administered in an anti-Irish manner; in fact, the overall government of Ireland was carried on in an anti-national manner. Although the Conservatives had just carried legislation to encourage railroad building in Canada, the same forces had derailed an earlier attempt to do the same thing for Ireland. Irish education was not being fairly supported. Irish businessmen were excluded from government contracts. The Irish people were in distress; trade was stagnating; unemployment was high, and evictions added to the suffering.<sup>33</sup> Today, O'Brien said, forty years after the union, Ireland was convinced England could not or would not govern it fairly. They must govern themselves. "The cry for Repeal is not the voice of Treason, but language of despair."<sup>34</sup> He regretfully concluded that "with Irish feelings this House has little sympathy-- little knowledge of Irish wants, and still less disposition to provide for those wants."<sup>35</sup>

It is not surprising then that O'Brien embraced Repeal when O'Connell and the others were arrested after complying with the government's order. Facing prison, O'Connell named the new convert his deputy.<sup>36</sup> Duffy, Mitchel and the other young men acclaimed him as their own leader--

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<sup>33</sup>Ibid., pp. 652-671.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., p. 672.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., p. 675.

<sup>36</sup>Gwynn, Young Ireland, p. 20.

previously there had been no leader within the younger group.<sup>37</sup> No one could know it then, but the assumption of leadership by the respectable, aristocratic and responsible parliamentarian sealed the fate of what was to become a revolutionary movement.

It is ironic to note that at the same time that he was being converted to the Repeal movement, O'Brien was decrying the violence being practiced in many parts of Ireland by agricultural terrorists:

. . . should violence and crime prevail--a great national effort, originating in the highest and noblest impulses, will degenerate into an unsuccessful rebellion, disastrous alike to victors and the vanquished.<sup>38</sup>

True--and William Smith O'Brien would lead it.

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<sup>37</sup>Ibid., pp. 16-17.

<sup>38</sup>Letter to the Repeal Association quoted in Duffy, Young Ireland, pp. 262-63.



## CHAPTER III

### THE OTHER SIDE OF THE CHANNEL

"The problem of peacefully governing  
seven millions of people."

-- Sir Robert Peel

When William Smith O'Brien committed himself to the Repeal Association, Lord John Russell was out of office and functioning as leader of the loyal opposition. Sir Robert Peel was Prime Minister from September, 1841, until July, 1846, during which time several significant developments arose in Parliament to affect Ireland. Despite a closer familiarity with Ireland, Peel's understanding and handling of the problem was not unlike Russell's. He, too, laid heavy stress on religious inequities, summing up the task of governing Ireland as "the problem of peaceably governing seven millions of people, and maintaining intact the Protestant Church Establishment for the religious instruction and consolation of one million."<sup>1</sup>

Both Peel and Russell, though of different parties, believed the Catholic clergy encouraged dissent and resentment because they relied so completely on poor Catholic farmers, who hated the English administration, for their own financial support. To neutralize the priests Peel

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<sup>1</sup>Peel to Lord Heytesbury, August 1, 1844, quoted in Charles S. Parker, Sir Robert Peel from His Private Papers (2nd. ed.; London: John Murray, 1899), III, 114.

initiated several reforms, including an increased grant to Maynooth College,<sup>2</sup> while Russell continued to urge at least partial disestablishment of the Church of Ireland.<sup>3</sup> In fact Russell came to Peel's aid in getting the Maynooth bill through Commons.<sup>4</sup>

Like Russell, Peel's Irish policy was one--intentionally or not--of alternating conciliation and coercion. He was outspokenly opposed to any compromise on Repeal, and fought O'Connell's threat in 1843 by initiating an arms act and sending troops.<sup>5</sup> He is credited with having O'Connell arrested after the canceled Clontarf meeting.<sup>6</sup>

Peel's championing of the arms bill of 1843 brought him into conflict with Russell who opposed some of the bill's harsher features.<sup>7</sup> Although the bill was delayed and slightly modified in committee, Peel was finally successful in getting it passed in August. Three years later another Peel-backed coercion bill for Ireland would bring down his administration. Russell, still later, justified his opposition:

I objected to the Bill on Irish grounds. I then thought, and I still think, that it is wrong to arrest men and put them in prison on the ground that they may

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<sup>2</sup>McCaffrey, Daniel O'Connell, p. 159, n. 49.

<sup>3</sup>Russell to Lord Lansdowne, July 19, 1843, quoted in Gooch, Later Correspondence of Russell, I, 64-65.

<sup>4</sup>Leading a colleague to assert, "Peel lives, moves, and has his being through Lord John Russell." Quoted in Ibid., p. 46.

<sup>5</sup>Peel to Lord DeGray, May 9, 10, 1843, quoted in Parker, Sir Robert Peel, III, 47-48.

<sup>6</sup>Woodward, Age of Reform, p. 350.

<sup>7</sup>Walpole, Life of Lord John Russell, I, 389-90.

be murderers and housebreakers. They may be, on the other hand, honest labourers going home from their work.<sup>8</sup>

In late 1843 Peel made the most significant of his Irish moves by forming the Devon Commission.<sup>9</sup> The Duke of Wellington was among those urging him to do so.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, when the commission's exhaustive report was in, Peel found it impossible to institute even the most minor tenant compensation reform since such an act seemed to many to threaten existing property rights.<sup>11</sup>

Peel and Russell had much in common in their Irish policies. Russell, also, would condone no thought of Repeal.<sup>12</sup> He had long advocated religious reform and some way of supporting the parish priests.<sup>13</sup> Still there were significant differences. Russell opposed Peel's coercive measures and particularly the prosecution of O'Connell and the others after Clontarf.<sup>14</sup> He was not so sure as Peel that land reforms and tenant right were the significant issues.<sup>15</sup> To him "social" issues were more important. Thus he could say on taking office in 1846:

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<sup>8</sup>Russell, Recollections and Suggestions, p. 241.

<sup>9</sup>See above pp. 2-4.

<sup>10</sup>Duke of Wellington to Peel, October 10, 1843, quoted in Parker, Sir Robert Peel, III, p. 64.

<sup>11</sup>Woodward, Age of Reform, p. 352.

<sup>12</sup>Russell to Duke of Leinster, September, 1844, quoted in Gooch, Later Correspondence of Russell, I, 72-73.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 77 and Walpole, Life of Lord John Russell, II, 76.

<sup>14</sup>Russell to Lansdowne, November 11, 1843, quoted in Gooch, Later Correspondence of Russell, I, 68-69.

<sup>15</sup>Russell, Recollections and Suggestions, pp. 180-82.

We consider that the social grievances of Ireland are those which are most prominent, and to which it is most likely to be in our power to afford, not a complete and immediate remedy, but some remedy, some kind of improvement so that some kind of hope may be entertained that ten or twelve years hence the country will, by the measures we undertake, be in a far better state with respect to the frightful destitution and misery which now prevail in that country. We have that practical object in view.<sup>16</sup>

After studying the above carefully worded statement Charles Gavan Duffy feared for the future of his country when Russell assumed office.<sup>17</sup> At the same time Nassau Senior summed up Parliament's knowledge of Ireland as:

. . . the great majority of the members of each House--that is to say, of the two Assemblies which govern Ireland--know less of that country than they know of Belgium or of Switzerland.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>Hansard, 3d. ser., Vol. 87 (1846), p. 1179.

<sup>17</sup>Duffy, Four Years of Irish History, p. 215.

<sup>18</sup>Senior, Journals, I, 123.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE GROWING CRISIS

"A new generation begins to act in Ireland."

-- Thomas Francis Meagher

Even though he believed there was "such a tendency to exaggeration and inaccuracy in Irish reports, that delay in acting upon them is always desirable," Peel told Sir James Graham on October 13, 1845, that "accounts of the state of the potato crop in Ireland are becoming very alarming."<sup>1</sup> From this first knowledge Peel acted quickly. Convinced the "only effectual remedy" was the removal of any impediment to the import of food,"<sup>2</sup> he moved to repeal the existing duties on the importation of grain (Corn Laws); a course of action in which he finally succeeded the following summer.

Crop failure was not new to Ireland in 1845. Within the previous ten years there had been no less than five "calamitous" harvests; the first had struck in 1838. Again in 1840, 1841, 1842, and 1844 the fields failed to flourish.<sup>3</sup> But the failure of the potato in 1845 was more widespread than usual and Isaac Butt wrote with more truth than he might have known when he said:

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<sup>1</sup>Quoted in Parker, Sir Robert Peel, III, 223.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 223-25.

<sup>3</sup>Eric Strauss, Irish Nationalism and British Democracy (New York: Columbia University Press, 1951), p. 104.

Ireland is now, . . . in the beginning of a calamity, the like of which the world has never seen. Four millions of people, . . . have been suddenly deprived of the sole article of their ordinary food. . . . Thousands are each day dying of starvation, . . .<sup>4</sup>

By February, 1846, extreme suffering was reported from more than ninety localities throughout Ireland and emergency food supplies were nearing exhaustion. Scientists sent by the government to observe conditions reported that no less than half the potato crop had been destroyed by the mysterious disease.<sup>5</sup> One government relief officer estimated that at least four million people would have to be fed from May through July before the new crop of potatoes was ready.<sup>6</sup> No one could state accurately how many were dying of starvation since as Butt said, "it is an incident of the neglect with which the people when living have been treated that we have no note of them when dead."<sup>7</sup>

To say that the young Irish leaders were outraged by the famine and its effects is understatement. Meagher stormed:

The desperate condition of the country demands a bold and decisive policy. From this hour, sir, let us have done with the English parliament--on this very night, sir, let us resolve to close our accounts with that parliament. Send no more petitions across the Channel. For fifty years you have petitioned, and the result has been 500,000 deaths. Henceforth, be that parliament accursed!<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Quoted in Terence de Vere White, The Road of Excess (Dublin: Brown and Nolan Ltd., n.d. [ca. 1946] ), p. 108.

<sup>5</sup>Woodham-Smith, The Great Hunger, p. 68. The disease was later found to be a virulent form of fungus.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 74.

<sup>7</sup>Quoted in White, The Road of Excess, pp. 108-09.

<sup>8</sup>Quoted in Meagher, Meagher of the Sword, p. 85.

Particularly galling to the young Irishmen was the sight of Irish-grown crops being exported while her people starved. This was done in the name of non-interference with trade despite the well-known practice of other European countries restricting food exports in similar emergencies.<sup>9</sup> England was charged with attempting to benefit from the famine.<sup>10</sup>

While a calamity of the scope of the famine could be expected to unite the members of the Repeal Association and direct them to work for the common cause, just the opposite was taking place within the ranks of the followers of O'Connell and O'Brien. The younger group sought to unite all Irishmen regardless of creed; O'Brien considered this unification of Protestant and Catholic to be "the dream of my life."<sup>11</sup> O'Connell, from the beginning, had derived his power from a nationalistic-Catholic appeal with outspoken support from the clergy; which tended to alienate the Protestant Irish.<sup>12</sup> In fact, during the winter of 1845, the Young Irelanders began to hold back from Conciliation Hall meetings because it had become, as one of them said, "such a holy show."<sup>13</sup> If the movement were to succeed Charles Gavan Duffy, editor of the Nation, felt it vital to win the support of Ulster and all Irishmen.<sup>14</sup>

The younger group also resented O'Connell's demagogic and autocratic rule and sought to institute a more sophisticated organization.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>See for instance Ibid., p. ix, and Mitchel, Jail Journal, pp. 16-17.

<sup>10</sup>Meagher, Meagher of the Sword, p. 79.

<sup>11</sup>Quoted in Duffy, Young Ireland, p. 673.

<sup>12</sup>Nowlan, The Politics of Repeal, p. 6.

<sup>13</sup>Quoted in Duffy, Four Years of Irish History, p. 6.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., pp. 21-25. <sup>15</sup>Nowlan, The Politics of Repeal, p. 12.

But most of all they opposed renewal of O'Connell's so-called "Whig alliance" with the return of Russell to power in June, 1846.<sup>16</sup> The young men wanted nothing to do with any alliances, church or party, and the theme of strong opposition to Whiggery runs through Meagher's ringing speeches:

We are opposed to a Whig Alliance. We demand that the Association should pursue the same policy under the Whigs as it did under the Conservatives.<sup>17</sup>

. . . [the Whigs] are the most complimentary and the most conscienceless--the most promising, and the most prevaricating--the most patronizing, and the most perfidious--the most paternal, and the most murderous--of all our English enemies-- . . .<sup>18</sup>

By 1846, leadership of the O'Connell faction was passing into the hands of his son John. Age had slowed the Liberator, and he never regained the active, day-to-day leadership of the association after his release from prison. John O'Connell now determined on a purge, according to O'Brien, "pushing out men opposed to the Whig alliance." The excuse was to be the issue of physical force versus moral force.<sup>19</sup>

In June, John O'Connell drafted a series of "Peace Resolutions" ostensibly based on the elder O'Connell's long-standing policy of relying on moral force alone. The resolutions completely repudiated, for all time, any resort to physical force regardless of circumstances.<sup>20</sup> This was an impossible promise to ask of young men dedicated to freeing their

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<sup>16</sup>Meagher, Meagher of the Sword, pp. vi-vii.

<sup>17</sup>Quoted in Ibid., p. 46.      <sup>18</sup>Quoted in Ibid., p. 88.

<sup>19</sup>Quoted in Duffy, Four Years of Irish History, p. 350.

<sup>20</sup>Gwynn, Young Ireland, pp. 72-75.



nation from British shackles and it had the designed effect. They refused. At Conciliation Hall O'Brien pleaded with the O'Connellites not to force a division; Mitchel, speaking as an Ulster Protestant, called for the union of all Irishmen against the English tyranny.<sup>21</sup> But the critical speech was made by the golden-tongued Meagher and earned him the appellation, "Meagher of the Sword."

Meagher began by declaring, "I come here to repeal the Act of Union--I come here for nothing else." He defended the Nation, which was being attacked as the instrument of the Young Irelanders. Then he moved on to the peace resolutions. Although he agreed (as did O'Brien and Mitchel) that a peaceful policy was the only practical course at the present time,

There are times when arms will alone suffice, and when political ameliorations call for a drop of blood, and many thousand drops of blood. . . . Be it for the defence, or be it for the assertion of a nation's liberty, I look upon the sword as a sacred weapon. . . . Abhor the sword and stigmatise the sword? No, my lord, for at its blow a giant nation sprang from the waters of the Atlantic and by its redeeming magic the fettered colony became a daring free republic. . . .<sup>22</sup>

Although by now the speaker had electrified his audience and applause was "breaking like a sudden storm in bursts of ecstasy" John O'Connell managed to interrupt. He shouted down any possibility of further discussion; the Young Irelanders rose as a group and followed William Smith O'Brien out of the hall.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>Portions of O'Brien's and Mitchel's speeches are reprinted in Ibid., pp. 75-78.

<sup>22</sup>Meagher's speech is reprinted in its entirety in Meagher, Meagher of the Sword, pp. 32-36.

<sup>23</sup>Gwynn, Young Ireland, pp. 77-78.

Now definitely an entity of its own, and no longer merely a faction within the Repeal Association, Young Ireland adopted a new name: the Irish Confederation.<sup>24</sup> Many young men began to be attracted to its banner, among them James Stephens, later to become the leader of the Fenian movement. Stephens had avoided the Repeal Association--"I thought it too much of a windbag, and too little of the real thing. When, however, the Irish Confederation was started I found it of sterner stuff."<sup>25</sup> Many of the young men welcomed this break with what they now began to call "Old Ireland." Meagher pointed the way,

A new generation begins to act in Ireland--a generation pledged to make this island a free nation and pledged to do so in the most clear, straightforward, righteous way.<sup>26</sup>

The circulation of the Nation had increased significantly since its founding and the words of the young men were being read in every part of the island.<sup>27</sup> Still, by allowing themselves to be disassociated from the Repeal Association, they had weakened their cause. The name O'Connell was magic throughout the land, and if Young Ireland had the talent, Old Ireland still had the numbers. Added to this, Young Ireland's repudiation of a sectarian appeal served only to win them the distrust of the Catholic clergy. Thus, at a time when national emergency called for the unified effort of all reasonable men, the drama of Young Ireland's secession became a dominant national issue, distracting from, rather than

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<sup>24</sup>Meagher, Meagher of the Sword, p. viii.

<sup>25</sup>Quoted in Ryan, The Fenian Chief, pp. 5-6.

<sup>26</sup>Quoted in Meagher, Meagher of the Sword, p. 51.

<sup>27</sup>Duffy, Young Ireland, p. 284, and Edmund Curtis, A History of Ireland (6th ed.; London: Methuen, 1950), p. 366.

aiding, local efforts to combat the famine. Neither Young Ireland nor Old Ireland turned its attention to the famine except to criticize the efforts of the English administration.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup>Woodham-Smith, The Great Hunger, pp. 329-30.

## CHAPTER V

### THE LEADERSHIP OF LORD JOHN

"It must be thoroughly understood  
that we cannot feed the people."

-- Lord John Russell

In late summer, 1846, Lord John Russell made the following melancholy announcement to Parliament:

I am sorry to be obliged to state that . . . the prospect of the potato crop this year is even more distressing than last year--that the disease has appeared earlier, and its ravages are far more extensive.<sup>1</sup>

The Irish potato failure was not following its usual course; the new crop would not erase the suffering and misery of the previous year's failure. Instead, another failure was threatening to compound the catastrophe. However, in office again as Prime Minister, Russell could not enjoy the luxury of being a member of the loyal opposition, able to criticize the leadership of the party in power.

The previous fall (1845) Russell had reacted to the first news of a crop failure with his customary statesmanship, calling on his constituents to support an immediate suspension of duties on grain. "We ought to abstain from all interference with the supply of food."<sup>2</sup> In this he preempted Peel's public announcement of his intention to do away

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<sup>1</sup>Quoted in Walpole, Life of Lord John Russell, I, 431.

<sup>2</sup>Russell's complete "Edinburgh Letter" is reprinted in Ibid., 406-09.

with the Corn Laws.<sup>3</sup>

Now Peel was out of office; Russell must lead. The new Prime Minister continued Peel's Irish relief measures at least for awhile. Peel had brought in American corn and sold it for a penny a pound. Broad scale public works had been instituted with the government and local landowners sharing the expense. Russell continued both of these programs. Neither he nor Peel considered stopping the export of Irish food crops.<sup>4</sup>

Within a few days of taking office Russell began to feel the pressure of the Irish crisis. O'Connell urged him to take some action immediately to relieve distress.<sup>5</sup> Russell appointed a new lord lieutenant for Ireland, the very capable and sympathetic John William Ponsonby, 4th Earl of Bessborough. With all doubt of a recurrence of the famine gone, Russell moved ahead on September 1, and instructed Bessborough to expand the public works, making sure the workmen were paid enough to make up for their lack of ability to grow their own food.<sup>6</sup> He kept in almost daily correspondence with either Bessborough or his chief secretary Henry Labouchere who complained that Irish landowners were growing more and more dissatisfied with the public works they were forced to partially finance. The landowners attacked the works as useless and said

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<sup>3</sup>Peel conceded Russell had forced the issue leaving the government "no option but either to do nothing or to act in apparent conformity with his advice, and propose the very measures he had recommended." Peel to Sir Henry Hardinge, December 16, 1845, quoted in Parker, Sir Robert Peel, III, 280-82.

<sup>4</sup>Woodward, Age of Reform, pp. 353-55.

<sup>5</sup>O'Connell to Russell, July 12, 1846, quoted in Gooch, Later Correspondence of Russell, I, 146.

<sup>6</sup>Russell to Lord Bessborough, September 1, 1846, quoted in Ibid., pp.146-47.

the money could be better spent on improving their own property.<sup>7</sup>

As the crisis deepened Russell's concern intensified. He broadened Bessborough's relief authority: "You have got all the power you can fairly have." Build anything, he said, which could be of public value including drainage projects and railroad roadbeds. "But you shall not want power either to give relief or enforce the law."<sup>8</sup>

Bessborough took Russell at his word and the number employed on public works soared. Charles Wood, Chancellor of the Exchequer grew concerned that the viceroy's interpretation of "public works" was going too far--"lest with his sweeping notions, of erasing the word 'public' he might have been undertaking building farmhouses." Russell snapped back that Wood's reasoning seemed to accept "the destruction of £10,000,000 of food as if it were an ordinary calamity."<sup>9</sup>

Still Russell strove to work within the framework of the natural economy of the country and to keep from upsetting that economy with artificial government measures. Responding to a demand that government hold down the price of food he answered curtly, "It must be scarcer--it must be dearer." Local groups should form of their own initiative, he said, and supply food "at a fair price with a moderate profit." Such local action would be much more effective than any imposed state action which "deadens private energy, prevents forethought and after superseding all

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<sup>7</sup>Labouchere to Russell, September 24, 1846, quoted in Ibid., pp. 147-48.

<sup>8</sup>Russell to Bessborough, October 4, 1846, quoted in Ibid., p. 149.

<sup>9</sup>Wood to Russell, October 11, 1846; and Russell to Wood, November 15, 1846, quoted in Ibid., pp. 151-54.

other exertion finds itself at last unequal to the gigantic task it has undertaken."<sup>10</sup> In the face of such a task local initiative seemed critical to Russell. Unfortunately, he still harbored doubts about the quality of the Irish character and--suspecting them of loafing on the public works--confided to Lord Lansdowne, "But, alas! the Irish have been taught many bad lessons and few good ones."<sup>11</sup> He self-righteously offered them this bit of gratuitous advice:

There are some things which the Crown cannot grant, which Parliament cannot enact--these are the spirit of self-reliance and the spirit of co-operation. . . . Happy will it be indeed if the Irish themselves take for their maxim 'Help yourselves, and Heaven will help you,' and then I think they will find there is some use in adversity.<sup>12</sup>

Heaven must not have been listening. By mid-December starvation deaths in Cork alone had reached one hundred a week.<sup>13</sup> Unreasoning panic had begun to sweep Ireland. The storehouses were empty and bands of the starving, "more like famishing wolves than men," roamed the countryside begging for food.<sup>14</sup>

William Smith O'Brien bitterly attacked the government's failure to meet the crisis and its seemingly cold-blooded attitude. On the first day of Parliament (January 19, 1847) he rose and described, among other things, how famine delegations in some parts of Ireland had been handed

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<sup>10</sup>Russell to Duke of Leinster, October 17, 1846, quoted in Ibid., pp. 156-57. See also Southgate, Passing of the Whigs, p. 177.

<sup>11</sup>Russell to Lansdowne, October 11, 1846, quoted in Gooch, Later Correspondence of Russell, I, 151.

<sup>12</sup>Hansard, 3d. ser., Vol. 89 (1847), p. 452.

<sup>13</sup>Woodham-Smith, The Great Hunger, p. 144.

<sup>14</sup>Relief official quoted in Ibid., p. 140.

reprinted extracts from Adam Smith's Wealth of Nations by smug government officials. Holding up one of the pamphlets, he demanded to know "whether multitudes, when they approached the government, were to be met, not with relief (which they might expect), but with pamphlets such as he held in his hand."<sup>15</sup>

Russell, in one of the rare occasions in which he took note of the Irish leader, responded that the opinion of the government was "diametrically" opposed to the policy suggested by the member for Limerick, who had suggested, in Russell's words that, "the government ought to have ransacked the world for food," and accepted the responsibility of feeding the whole of Ireland.<sup>16</sup> Russell patiently explained that as food was drained from other parts of the United Kingdom the price would have gone up to "our consumers in England and Scotland."<sup>17</sup> Actually Russell's attitude had changed since the preceding October when he had said, "It must be thoroughly understood that we cannot feed the people. It were a cruel delusion to pretend to do so."<sup>18</sup> He was now preparing to do just that.

Since early December Russell had been growing increasingly disenchanted with the public works scheme of relief. Many people, he told Bessborough, were drawing wages who already had a means of livelihood.<sup>19</sup> Bessborough confirmed this, blaming the landowners. The local "gentlemen,"

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<sup>15</sup>Hansard, 3d. ser., Vol. 89 (1847), p. 83.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 140.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 139.

<sup>18</sup>Quoted in Gooch, Later Correspondence of Russell, I, 151.

<sup>19</sup>Russell to Bessborough, December 1, 1846, quoted in Ibid., p.



he said, were placing their own tenants on the works rather than give them employment privately. When board of works officials tried to intervene they were attacked and beaten.<sup>20</sup> Those who really needed the work were being turned away. Still, the numbers on relief swelled; on December 9, the figure stood at 310,000.<sup>21</sup> Labouchere reported the workhouses were full "and applicants are turned away to perish."<sup>22</sup> A week later Russell told Bessborough, "We really cannot stand this"--the program was out of hand and the cost was staggering.<sup>23</sup> By late January Russell reported more than 500,000 were being employed on the public works. Using a conservative estimate of four people to the family, Russell judged the government was supporting two million at a cost rapidly approaching a million pounds per month.<sup>24</sup>

Ireland was the main subject on Russell's mind and had been for some months.<sup>25</sup> As soon as Parliament met he proposed abolition of the Navigation Acts which had restricted the importation of food in foreign vessels and suspension of the remaining duties on grain.<sup>26</sup> Six days

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<sup>20</sup>Bessborough to Russell, December 12, 1846, quoted in Ibid., pp. 163-64.

<sup>21</sup>Woodham-Smith, The Great Hunger, p. 156.

<sup>22</sup>Labouchere to Russell, December 11, 1846, quoted in Gooch, Later Correspondence of Russell, I, 163.

<sup>23</sup>Russell to Bessborough, December 17, 1846, quoted in Ibid., p. 165.

<sup>24</sup>Hansard, 3d. ser., Vol. 89 (1847), p. 433.

<sup>25</sup>Walpole, Life of Lord John Russell, I, 435.

<sup>26</sup>Hansard, 3d. ser., Vol. 89 (1847), p. 143.

later, on January 25, he submitted a four-part program to meet the Irish crisis. He began by characterizing the situation in his much-quoted words as "a famine of the thirteenth century acting upon the population of the nineteenth."<sup>27</sup> He proceeded to explain how the public works system had broken down. It was drawing men from private employment, discouraging the very agricultural pursuits necessary to provide next season's crop. To remedy this, and to prevent as many as possible from starving, Russell proposed a temporary system of "outdoor relief." Those destitute persons incapable of working would be fed (cooked food to prevent resale) at government expense. The localities would be expected to pay back half the cost later, when able. The able-bodied would have to go into the workhouses; however, if they were full, the able-bodied would also be eligible for outdoor relief. He also proposed a bill to make low-interest loans to landowners for improvements, a bill to simplify the sale of debt-ridden estates and a last measure to encourage emigration.<sup>28</sup>

Russell's outdoor relief measure was passed quickly. Deservedly or not, it has brought much criticism to its author. He has been accused of giving in to pressure from the landlords who could not, or would not, meet the wages being paid their agricultural laborers on the public works. Lending credence to this criticism was a clause incorporated in the bill denying relief to anyone holding more than one-quarter-acre of land--a clause designed to clear the land for landlords since these people were forced to give up their land in order to gain food for their starving families.<sup>29</sup> Still, Russell's measure did save thousands of lives. It

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<sup>27</sup>Ibid., pp. 428-29.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., pp. 428-35.

<sup>29</sup>Strauss, Irish Nationalism and British Democracy, p. 86.

had been necessary to replace the public works system with some other form of relief and do it quickly. Public works, while effective in England in time of distress, had proved incapable of meeting the massive Irish crisis and Russell had been thrust into the undesirable position of having to experiment with relief measures in a time of catastrophe.<sup>30</sup>

As the public works closed down and soup kitchens opened, the number being fed soared. In May more than two million a day came for their daily ration; in July no less than three million Irishmen were being sustained, bowl in hand, in the soup kitchen lines.<sup>31</sup> As summer wore on the crops flourished and food prices fell.<sup>32</sup> As early as June 28, Russell was able to reassure his worried Chancellor of the Exchequer that aid to the able-bodied could be ended--even though it might be necessary to support widows, children and the infirm through August.<sup>33</sup>

Even though the crops were good in 1847, millions of Irishmen were destitute and could not buy the now plentiful food. Owing to a lack of seed and the distressed condition of the people, the home-grown potato crop had not been planted in sufficient quantity--less than a fifth the normal crop--and the threat of starvation was still very real.<sup>34</sup> Russell now was faced with another threat: violence. Bessborough had died--some said of overwork brought on by the famine--and had been replaced by Lord

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<sup>30</sup>Hansard, 3d. ser., Vol. 89 (1847), p. 141.

<sup>31</sup>Woodham-Smith, The Great Hunger, pp. 295-96.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., pp. 301-03.

<sup>33</sup>Russell to Wood, June 28, 1847, quoted in Gooch, Later Correspondence of Russell, I, 172.

<sup>34</sup>Woodham-Smith, The Great Hunger, pp. 301-03.

Clarendon in May. By the end of October, Clarendon's letters to Russell betrayed a serious concern for growing disorder. Mobs were forming, stealing food and threatening lives; Clarendon said--"there is a savage spirit of disaffection."<sup>35</sup>

Russell, to his credit, resisted Clarendon's appeals for coercion. He told him he was opposed to "a mere suppression of the violent symptoms" without a cure for the disease itself. The problem, he said, was a social one and widespread; to arrest a few would do no good since, he believed, there was no representative leadership. At the root of the disaffection was "the mischievous custom of growing paupers and potatoes on the soil, and from the violent means taken by the landlords to extirpate the evil." The cure, Russell decided, lay in granting some form of tenant right similar to the practice in Ulster. He admitted earlier reform efforts had not gone to the heart of the problem--"discontent of the poorer tenantry has been the pabulum upon which agitation for repeal has fed, fattened and flourished."<sup>36</sup>

This represented another significant change in Russell's thinking. Earlier he had been content to lay the blame for Irish discontent at the doorstep of religious inequities.<sup>37</sup> To tamper with tenant right was to tamper with property right and was dangerous ground indeed for any Whig, even Lord John. At the same time the experience of the famine had

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<sup>35</sup> Lord Clarendon to Russell, October 23, 1847, quoted in Walpole, Life of Lord John Russell, I, 459-61.

<sup>36</sup> Russell to Clarendon, November 12, 1847, quoted in Ibid., 462-64.

<sup>37</sup> As a comparison see his suggested Irish program of 1833, above pp. 10-11.

raised disturbing questions that troubled the consciences of many Englishmen. Particularly painful were repeated reports of landlord cruelty and wholesale evictions at the height of the crisis. Russell strongly disapproved of this practice, called it "atrocious." No English landlord would "turn out fifty persons at once, and burn their houses over their heads, giving them no provision for the future."<sup>38</sup>

However, the immediate problem was one of spreading lawlessness, and as autumn (1847) progressed Clarendon's letters to his executive betrayed a degree of alarm that increased almost daily. Landlords were being murdered with distressing regularity and in some instances the Catholic clergy were even encouraging the violence. On November 17, he described how one such landlord had been denounced from the altar by a local priest, who ended his attack with the challenge, "and yet this man lives." Two Sundays later the landlord was murdered. Clarendon threatened to resign if the government did not provide him with additional powers of coercion.<sup>39</sup>

Regretfully Russell conceded. On November 29, he went before the House of Commons and proposed a measure giving the Irish viceroy power to declare a particular district disturbed, increasing the constabulary in the district and requiring the licensing of all firearms. The bill was passed before Christmas. Russell's critics welcomed the chance to criticize the Whig leader for resorting to coercion, when it

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<sup>38</sup>Russell to Clarendon, November 15, 1847, quoted in Walpole, Life of Lord John Russell, I, 464-65.

<sup>39</sup>Clarendon to Russell, November 17, 18, 1847, quoted in Ibid., pp. 468-69.

had been an Irish coercion bill that had brought down Peel and given Russell the chance to form the present government seventeen months earlier.<sup>40</sup> Nevertheless, Russell made it clear when he introduced the bill that his current Irish policy must be more than mere coercion. Positive measures were needed. He followed up with his bill to relieve encumbered estates and another requiring the compensation of tenants for improvements. The first was passed later in the session of 1848. The second was held in committee and it was not for another twenty years that this critical area of Irish relief was corrected.<sup>41</sup>

On another front, Pope Pius IX issued a papal rescript in January, 1848, urging the Irish clergy to concern themselves only with clerical matters and to avoid political agitation. Russell had been instrumental in this development, working delicately behind the scene, since at this time Britain was forbidden, by act of Parliament, to engage in communication with the Vatican.<sup>42</sup>

Despite Clarendon's district arms act, lawlessness continued to trouble Ireland. Russell was far from satisfied with the progress of his Irish reform, which in early 1848 amounted to only the encumbered estates and coercion measures, and the placing of distress relief under the Poor Law. In March, 1848, he drafted a sweeping program combining five measures. First he proposed a bill to control evictions; balanced against

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<sup>40</sup>Ibid., pp. 469-72.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., p. 473, and Hansard, 3d. ser., Vol 95 (1847), p. 275. Donald Southgate points out that Russell is not given sufficient credit for having conceived the outlines of what later became the Land Act of 1870--to Gladstone's credit. (The Passing of the Whigs, p. 180).

<sup>42</sup>Nowlan, The Politics of Repeal, pp. 176-78.

this was a measure easing the repayment of famine loans by the landowners. Next, a million pounds would be advanced immediately for public works projects, particularly including drainage of waste lands. He also proposed to raise £400,000, through a land tax, to be distributed to the Irish Catholic church. Last, to meet the mounting violence, Russell proposed to suspend the habeas corpus act for one year. Typically his ambitious program met opposition almost at once within his own cabinet, particularly on the proposals dealing with Catholics and evictions.<sup>43</sup> Two cabinet members, Lansdowne and Palmerston, were Irish landlords and strongly opposed any move to control the right of their class to evict "small holders and squatting cottiers," in Palmerston's words.<sup>44</sup> Of the five proposals only the suspension of the habeas corpus act and the easing of famine loan repayments were successful. England was not yet ready.

Ireland may well have claimed a larger share of Lord John Russell's time than any other foreign or domestic problem, as the editor of his later correspondence has asserted.<sup>45</sup> Still at the beginning of 1848 the Whig Prime Minister had little to show for it.

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<sup>43</sup> Walpole, Life of Lord John Russell, II, 64-65.

<sup>44</sup> Quoted in Nowlan, The Politics of Repeal, p. 198.

<sup>45</sup> Gooch, Later Correspondence of Russell, I, 218.

## CHAPTER VI

### THE RISING AND THE REACTION

"All my plans, however, were deranged by the measures adopted by the British Government."

-- William Smith-O'Brien

The winter of 1847-48 marked the beginning of the third year since the famine's arrival. Conditions in Ireland showed no real sign of improving, despite the favorable harvest. The first two years of famine had broken the back of whatever "natural economy" might have previously existed, and Russell's policy of throwing the burden of relief on the Poor Law meant that workhouses--supported by local taxes--were the only thing standing between many Irishmen and starvation. In many districts the ability to pay these taxes (Poor Law rates) no longer existed; though collections were forced by threat of armed guard and property confiscations were common, the resources were just not there. In those districts starvation of the common people not only threatened, it existed. In November, 1847, relief officials estimated that, even with the workhouses full, another 360,000 men would require outdoor relief, and no funds were available.<sup>1</sup> Clarendon pleaded, "Ireland cannot be left to her own resources."<sup>2</sup> Throughout Ireland there was a hardening of emotion as the earlier terror of starvation settled into bitter hatred

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<sup>1</sup>Woodham-Smith, The Great Hunger, p. 321.

<sup>2</sup>Quoted in Ibid., p. 317.



for a government that would allow such suffering. In many parts of the south, desperate Irishmen turned to the only way they knew to exact retribution--violence.

On the other side of the channel, two years of Irish suffering coupled with the renewed violence had wrung out British emotion as well. Regretfully Russell informed Clarendon, "The state of Ireland for the next few months must be one of great suffering. Unhappily the agitation for Repeal has contrived to destroy nearly all sympathy in this country."<sup>3</sup> The Prime Minister and his administration equated Irish lawlessness and violence with agitation for Repeal. They read into the murders and beatings a grand plan for insurrection secretly being formed by young and old Ireland--who were, in fact, too busy squabbling among themselves for any organized resistance. In this the Englishmen were misled by their own unfamiliarity with Ireland and by the panic-stricken reports of their principal representative in that land.

Clarendon painted a bleak picture, declaring the preceding October (1847), "I feel as if I was at the head of a Provisional Government in a half-conquered country."<sup>4</sup> In February he described for Russell "the utterly demoralized condition of the people. Their indifference to crime of every description," he considered to be "very alarming symptoms for the future."<sup>5</sup> By the end of March Clarendon was almost beside himself,

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<sup>3</sup>Russell to Clarendon, October 21, 1847, quoted in Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Clarendon to Russell, October 10, 1847, quoted in Gooch, Later Correspondence of Russell, I, 218.

<sup>5</sup>Clarendon to Russell, February 5, 1848, quoted in Ibid., pp. 220-21.

he was "nearly a state prisoner." His life was being threatened:

No Tipperary landlord ever received more threatening notices than I do, or more warnings as to when and how I am to be assassinated. . . . as Dublin is full of the greatest ruffians on earth, I am obliged to observe a certain amount of precaution, and I only go out in the carriage for a short walk in the park, . . . the life I lead is hardly endurable.<sup>6</sup>

Trapped by his fears in his own residence, Clarendon was a poor judge of conditions or the imminence of rebellion. He imagined he saw sedition and revolutionary preparations being carried on openly. He felt powerless to cope with the leaders; "what care O'Brien and Mitchell [sic] for an imprisonment that will make martyrs of them?"<sup>7</sup>

Actually what Clarendon saw, and did not recognize, was evidence of the continuing divisiveness within the ranks of the Irish nationalists. On February 12, 1848, a new newspaper appeared on the streets of Dublin. Called the United Irishman, it was, in the strictest sense of the word, revolutionary, and contained instructions for casting bullets and making iron-tipped pikes. Its editor was none other than John Mitchel, late chief writer for the Nation, and member of the council of the Irish Confederation.<sup>8</sup>

A breakup within the Confederation had been brewing for several months. The previous September (1847) O'Brien, Duffy and the other leaders had decided--somewhat belatedly--that the Confederation should have a clear statement of policy and program. O'Brien, quite naturally,

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<sup>6</sup>Clarendon to Russell, March 30, 1848, quoted in Walpole, Life of Lord John Russell, II, 70n.

<sup>7</sup>Clarendon to Russell, March 30, 1848, quoted in Gooch, Later Correspondence of Russell, I, 221-22.

<sup>8</sup>Nowlan, The Politics of Repeal, pp. 171-72, and Walpole, Life of Lord John Russell, II, 71.

avored a moderate program that would appear responsible and appeal to as many Irishmen of all classes and both religious groups as possible. Duffy took the lead in formulating the new program during O'Brien's absence at Parliament. Trying to keep the appeal broad and avoid offending landowners--whose aid he felt the movement desperately needed--he proposed a policy of peaceful agitation and a campaign to elect courageous and independent members to Parliament who would, in turn, reflect the needs of their country. At the same time, nationalists should seek to gain control of their local governments through elections. Such a moderate platform--at a time when national crisis demanded strong words and strong actions--seemed to John Mitchel to amount almost to surrender.<sup>9</sup>

Any doubt in Mitchel's mind about the effectiveness of leaving matters to parliamentary means had disappeared with the passage of the coercion bill of November, 1847. The measure had been passed with the open support of the Irish landlord class,<sup>10</sup> convincing Mitchel there could be no effective multi-class action.<sup>11</sup> In inflammatory phrases he proposed his own program:

"The Nation and the Confederation should rather employ themselves in promulgating sound instruction upon military affairs . . . a deliberate study of the theory and practice of guerilla warfare."<sup>12</sup>

The government had abrogated all responsibility, a Mitchel supporter charged. They were intent on extermination, and Ireland, "which once num-

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<sup>9</sup>Nowlan, The Politics of Repeal, pp. 155-56, and McCaffrey, The Irish Question, pp. 69-70.

<sup>10</sup>Their sentiment is understandable, since they were the ones who were being murdered. See above, p. 46.

<sup>11</sup>Meagher, Meagher of the Sword, p. xi.

<sup>12</sup>Quoted in Duffy, Four Years of Irish History, p. 507.

bered nine millions may be checked in its growth and coolly, gradually murdered."<sup>13</sup> This was to be a class struggle, Mitchel said, an agrarian revolution; let it begin with a refusal on the part of tenant farmers to pay poor taxes.<sup>14</sup> It does not seem to have occurred to Mitchel that those same poor taxes were keeping hundreds of thousands of Irishmen from starving to death. O'Brien was dismayed by his suggestions, the Confederation refused to accept his plan, and Mitchel withdrew to found the United Irishman, and attack the English government on his own terms.

Spurring Mitchel on to even greater heights of militancy was the example of the February, 1848, revolution in France. If force could bring success in the streets of Paris why would it not also prove effective in the streets of Dublin?<sup>15</sup> O'Brien and the other confederates were also encouraged. The story spread that French Foreign Minister Alphonse de Lamartine had accepted an Irish flag from a group of Irishmen living in Paris as a symbol of French sympathy for their cause. Full of hope, O'Brien and Meagher led a delegation to Paris to try to turn this sympathy into actual aid. In the meantime, the British government had been warned of the mission, and demanded that Lamartine state his position. Anxious for British approval of his new government, the French leader assured them the only flag France recognized in the British Isles was the Union Jack. Thus, O'Brien and Meagher's delegation received a cool reception when it reached Paris.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>Thomas Devin Reilly quoted in Nowlan, The Politics of Repeal, p. 157.

<sup>14</sup>Gwynn, Young Ireland, p. 149.

<sup>15</sup>McCaffrey, The Irish Question, p. 70.

<sup>16</sup>Mansergh, The Irish Question, pp. 62-63.

Mitchel continued to outrage both the government and the Irish moderates through the pages of his newspaper. He later boasted, "the United Irishman was established specifically as an Organ of Revolution,"<sup>17</sup> it was designed to stimulate the people to "the point of insurrection."<sup>18</sup> In this he was not successful; but by intimidating Lord Clarendon he did succeed in stimulating the British government to action. In early April (1848) Lord Campbell (a member of Russell's cabinet) wrote the Prime Minister suggesting that a new law be framed which would make certain kinds of treasonable acts (by "open and advised speaking") a felony punishable by transportation for either fourteen years or life.<sup>19</sup> The administration had no desire to see the rebels hanged, drawn and quartered--as under the existing high-treason statute--and Campbell pointed out to Russell:

Thus while you would have the glory of mitigating the severity of the penal code, you would be armed with the effectual means of sending Messrs. Mitchel, Meager [sic] and Smith O'Brien to Botany Bay.<sup>20</sup>

The bill, known as the Crown and Government Security Act,<sup>21</sup> met opposition

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<sup>17</sup>Mitchel, Jail Journal, p. 17.      <sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 19.

<sup>19</sup>Walpole, Life of Lord John Russell, II, 67.

<sup>20</sup>Quoted in Gooch, Later Correspondence of Russell, I, 227-29. Campbell must have been using "Botany Bay" as a figure of speech as New South Wales stopped taking convicts after 1840. Van Dieman's land (Tasmania) did so, however, until 1853. See W. D. Hussey, The British Empire and Commonwealth, 1500-1961 (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1963), p. 173.

<sup>21</sup>The Irish leaders referred to it as the "treason-felony act." The new measure would not do away with the death penalty for high treason, but simply make it practical for the government to prosecute lesser offenders without the necessity for imposing the death penalty.

in the House since it openly infringed on the right of free speech, and Russell was forced to promise that its duration would be limited. Nevertheless, it passed through Parliament "with the speed of an express train," becoming law April 22.<sup>22</sup> Both Mitchel and Meagher claimed later that the measure was, in Mitchel's words, "passed with a special view to crush the United Irishman, and to destroy its Editor."<sup>23</sup> After taking credit for passage of the act, Mitchel then deliberately violated it. He hoped to prove one of two things by his arrest: First, if the Whigs packed his jury they would be committing the same offense for which they had previously criticized the Conservatives. Second, if they did not, he would be acquitted and thus gain a victory for Ireland in discrediting the English. As a corollary to his plan Mitchel made it no secret that if convicted, he would trust in the people to rise and rescue him.<sup>24</sup>

Mitchel got more than he bargained for. Not only was he arrested, but O'Brien and Meagher too were thrown into jail to be tried under the new act. The latter two were defended by the eloquent Isaac Butt, who "turned the defence of the prisoners into an impassioned indictment of the Government."<sup>25</sup> The trial, itself, became the excuse for formidable demonstrations by O'Brien's supporters. On May 15, a crowd estimated at 10,000 escorted them through the streets of Dublin to the trial. Spectators jammed into every vantage point.<sup>26</sup> The courtrooms were packed but

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<sup>22</sup>Quoted in Woodham-Smith, The Great Hunger, p. 340.

<sup>23</sup>Meagher, Meagher of the Sword, p. 344, and Mitchel, Jail Journal, p. 18. The quotation is from the latter.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., p. 19.

<sup>25</sup>White, The Road of Excess, p. 24.

<sup>26</sup>Gwynn, Young Ireland, pp. 185-86.

the juries were not; both Meagher and O'Brien were acquitted.<sup>27</sup> Mitchel's trial followed soon after and the government decided to take no chance on his acquittal. In Mitchel's words, they had decided, "not to try but, pretend to try me, . . . and so get rid of one obstacle at least to the fulfillment of British policy."<sup>28</sup> Mitchel was convicted and sentenced to fourteen years transportation. His supporters made plans to fulfill his earlier prediction by attempting to rescue him. He refused to discourage their plans, but others "of my Confederate comrades differed from me; restrained the Clubs; . . . Their decision was wrong; and, as I firmly believe, fatal."<sup>29</sup>

Charges of packed juries were common in Ireland at the time, but the trials of the three Confederates drew so much attention in Ireland and England both that Russell was forced to explain the government's action on the floor of the House of Commons.<sup>30</sup> In any event the first of the four revolutionaries was now on his way to Tasmania.<sup>31</sup> Three months later Clarendon offered a postscript to Mitchel's trial when he reported

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<sup>27</sup>Mitchel, Jail Journal, pp. 18-19.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid. Russell's official biographer described the circumstances of Mitchel's trial this way:

"The trial was watched with great anxiety by the friends both of order and of disorder. The former thought it necessary to take the steps usual in Ireland, but repugnant to Englishmen, for securing a fair jury."

(Walpole, Life of Lord John Russell, II, 71).

<sup>29</sup>Mitchel, Jail Journal, p. 20.

<sup>30</sup>Hansard, 3d. ser., Vol. 98 (1848), pp. 1320-27.

<sup>31</sup>Tasmania was known as Van Diemen's Land until 1856. (Hussey, British Empire and Commonwealth, pp. 170-71).

to Russell that it was almost impossible to secure jurors for an upcoming trial. No one wanted to incur the revenge of his fellow countrymen. Many prospective jurors had offered to pay a £100 fine rather than serve. One man who had served on Mitchel's jury had since suffered greatly; he was still subject to attack, had been spit upon and insulted.<sup>32</sup>

O'Brien also suffered repercussions from the May trials. He felt he had been maneuvered into a situation where the casual onlooker would connect his name, and the cause he was trying to lead, with Mitchel's violent preaching:

The Government exhibited no little skill in directing against me a large amount of prejudice by coupling [with my] . . . prosecution, Mr. Mitchel whose writings in the United Irishman had alienated from the cause of Repeal and from Confederation an incalculable number of persons belonging to the higher and wealthier classes of society. . . those who have something to lose.<sup>33</sup>

At the same time that Mitchel's secession and the government's prosecution was threatening to narrow and weaken the appeal of the young nationalists, O'Brien was struggling to widen its base, to present a unified front representing all Irishmen. Both he and John O'Connell--who had inherited leadership of the Repeal Association from his father--spoke out on the need for the two organizations to band together. Negotiations were begun in early 1848, but soon broke down when it became apparent that neither group would consent to submerge its identity in the other.<sup>34</sup> Still, Duffy continued to urge reunion through the pages of the Nation, writing in March, that members of the Repeal Association were "animated by the

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<sup>32</sup>Clarendon to Russell, July 21, 1848, quoted in Gooch, Later Correspondence of Russell, I, 230.

<sup>33</sup>Quoted in Gwynn, Young Ireland, p. 165.

<sup>34</sup>Nowlan, The Politics of Repeal, p. 180.



same noble spirit of fraternity and forgiveness" as the Confederates.<sup>35</sup> Mitchel's martyrdom served as a catalyst, and finally in late May the two groups resolved their differences agreeing to disband their old organizations and form a new Irish League. O'Brien welcomed the reunion:

. . . the progress of events has produced a much nearer approximation of feeling and of opinion than was believed to exist between the Confederates and the members of the Repeal Association. Both parties now admit that we stand upon the "last plank" . . . Events, not arguments, have cancelled the famous "peace resolutions." Our controversy will soon narrow itself into the single question, now often uttered with impatience--  
When shall the Irish nation strike?<sup>36</sup>

John O'Connell was dismayed by such strong language and, while not opposing the unification, personally withdrew--unfortunately taking his name with him.<sup>37</sup> Still the reunion added greatly to the strength O'Brien was trying to muster in the early summer of 1848 for the confrontation to which he was now committed.

However, if O'Brien believed that reunification with the Old Irish meant automatic support from the Catholic clergy he was sadly mistaken. Yet without them the movement was doomed to failure. The active encouragement of parish priests had been instrumental in every popular Irish movement since 1782. In seceding from the Repeal Association the Young Irish had purposefully severed any reliance on sectarian support, and in the intervening months John O'Connell had systematically worked to further alienate the clergy from Young Ireland. Before the reconciliation of 1848 the mayor of Kilkenny described O'Connell's work to

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<sup>35</sup>Quoted in Ibid., p. 183.

<sup>36</sup>Quoted in Gwynn, Young Ireland, p. 209.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., pp. 210-11.

Duffy as,

"the long pre-arranged blackening of all your characters in the eyes of the Catholic clergy, who are hereabouts to a man opposed to you . . . this is an immense power you have to encounter, and any public meeting anywhere in Ireland would, by its majority, rule against you . . . 38

Such an alienation could not be erased overnight by the simple signing of a truce between the two warring factions. Added to this was the work of the British government in driving a papal wedge between priest and politics.<sup>39</sup>

O'Brien's efforts to broaden his movement's support led even to a short-lived flirtation with the Chartist movement then reaching its peak in England. The Chartists did seize on Mitchel's persecution and use it to condemn the government but their support had no noticeable effect in Ireland where Chartism had few followers.<sup>40</sup>

A most striking example of the need for the Young Irelanders to strengthen their cause occurred in February, 1848. It was decided that they should put their recently adopted policy of reform through parliamentary means<sup>41</sup> to the test. Meagher was to stand for election in his hometown of Waterford. Not yet reconciled with the Young Irelanders, the Repeal Association also put up a candidate. Both were soundly defeated by a local Whig landowner, and Meagher's own father--a staunch Old

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<sup>38</sup>Quoted in Woodham-Smith, The Great Hunger, p. 342.

<sup>39</sup>See above, p. 47. If there was any inclination toward sympathy among the priests, it was put to yet another test when the republican revolution in Paris re-erupted in late June and the Archbishop of Paris was killed at a workers' barricade. (Robertson, Revolutions of 1848, pp. 93-94).

<sup>40</sup>Nowlan, The Politics of Repeal, pp. 185-86 and 204.

<sup>41</sup>See above, p. 52.

Irelander--refused to support his son.<sup>42</sup>

Thus in June, 1848, O'Brien, Duffy and Meagher were struggling manfully to unite all Ireland into an effective weapon with which to combat the common English enemy. Events were moving swiftly to bring their efforts to a test--more swiftly than they realized. During spring and early summer the government's official attitude can best be summarized in the policy suggested to Clarendon by Home Secretary Sir George Grey, on April 3. Grey told him the government strongly opposed any drastic action against the rebels that might actually provoke them to action or lead to embarrassing parliamentary debates. This would only encourage public opinion in their favor. Instead he counseled inaction, "letting these gentlemen put themselves completely in the wrong."<sup>43</sup>

Nevertheless, Clarendon could not be delayed indefinitely. After Mitchel's conviction the language of the Nation became more and more inflammatory. On July 8, Clarendon acted and Duffy was placed under arrest.<sup>44</sup>

In the meantime Confederate clubs throughout the country were being encouraged to gather arms and engage in military drill. Near the end of June O'Brien set out on a personal inspection tour through Kerry and Cork. At every village he was met "with the utmost enthusiasm." In the city of Cork a large demonstration by all the local clubs was organized for the Irish leader. In his own words:

. . . I promised to address them in the city park. Accordingly, about nightfall, by the light of a glorious moon, the Clubs

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<sup>42</sup>Athearn, Thomas Francis Meagher, p. 7, and Meagher, Meagher of the Sword, p. xii; cf. Nowlan, The Politics of Repeal, p. 181.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., p. 197.

<sup>44</sup>Walpole, Life of Lord John Russell, II, 72.

marched in regular order to a convenient spot and took up a separate position. There could not have been less than from 7,000 to 10,000 persons present. The scene was most animating. I left this meeting under the impression that the population of Cork would be ready to act with the utmost vigour whenever this country should demand their services.<sup>45</sup>

He had not yet decided on open conflict, but instead hoped that a sufficient show of strength would bring the English government to terms and justice to Ireland. While still in Cork he heard of Duffy's arrest, an event which convinced him of the even more urgent need for the clubs to be in readiness. O'Brien hastened on his tour of inspection,<sup>46</sup> trying, he said

. . . to develop the public feeling of that country in a constitutional manner by adhesion to the League and by the establishment of local clubs. All my plans, however, were deranged by the measures adopted by the British Government.<sup>47</sup>

Clarendon had acted again. On July 19--ten days after Duffy's arrest--the viceroy activated the provisions of the "district" coercion act of the preceding November and proclaimed the cities of Dublin, Cork, Drogheda and Waterford as "disturbed" districts. Among other things, this meant all citizens in those communities must give up their arms and ammunition.

In Waterford, Meagher heard the news. At home he took down the family sword, buckled it on and, "gave myself up to the gay illusion of a gallant fight, a triumphal entry, at the head of armed thousands, in Dublin, before long!"<sup>48</sup> Hurrying to Dublin, he learned that the executive council of the League still was not committed to action. Instead they

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<sup>45</sup>Quoted in Gwynn, Young Ireland, p. 213.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., pp. 22-23.

<sup>47</sup>Quoted in Ibid., p. 226.

<sup>48</sup>Quoted in Meagher, Meagher of the Sword, p. 174.

advised club members to hide their arms. The leaders judged they would have at least a month to finish organizing, and fan the flames of agitation to a white heat, before an actual rising. The next day (July 22) they learned the habeas corpus act had been suspended and a warrant issued for the arrest of O'Brien.<sup>49</sup>

If the rebel leaders were surprised by the government's swift action they had company in London in the person of Lord John Russell. Russell had been under steady pressure from Clarendon for at least a month to suspend the habeas corpus act but he had held back expecting strong opposition in Parliament. Finally, on July 21, the cabinet decided they could delay no longer. The next day Russell rose in Parliament and asked for the suspension. To his amazement no opposition appeared, and the measure was passed through all its stages in time for him to attend a dinner party at his home.<sup>50</sup>

Dinner parties were far from the thoughts of Thomas Francis Meagher in Dublin. O'Brien was at Wexford. A newly elected executive council consisting of Meagher and four others could not be assembled and all the young Irishman could think of was to find O'Brien and see if he now, at last, would lead a rising. Together with John Dillon, another member of the executive council, Meagher set off in the night in search of O'Brien.<sup>51</sup> The first flush of excitement began to wear off and Meagher felt a sense of foreboding; he had "the feeling that we were aiming far beyond our strength." Still he saw no other way to turn. Their honor

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., pp. 173-83.

<sup>50</sup> Walpole, Life of Lord John Russell, II, 72.

<sup>51</sup> Meagher, Meagher of the Sword, p. 185.

and the honor of Ireland demanded that they meet this act of the British with insurrection.<sup>52</sup>

The next morning at 6:00 A.M., they found O'Brien and told him the news. In O'Brien's words:

A change of plans now became inevitable. I had to decide whether I should allow myself to be arrested, whether I should avoid arrest by flight, or whether I should resist the arrest and suffer the country to make such resistance the occasion of a collision with the Government of England.

. . . . .

It seemed to me that neither . . . [arrest or flight] would have been worthy of my own personal position or consistent with the character and interest of this country. . . . I had more than once proclaimed my opinion that armed resistance to the British Government had become a solemn duty, and this new act of aggression upon the liberties of Ireland afforded a casus belli, a motive and an occasion for a struggle such as no patriotic Irishman could question.<sup>53</sup>

Once determined on insurrection it now became necessary to choose the field of action. Dublin was ruled out although the Confederate clubs there were the best organized of any place. There were 11,000 British troops stationed in Dublin and too many lives would be lost. Instead they would start in some smaller place, win a victory and thus rally support for a general rising throughout the island.<sup>54</sup>

There followed much hurrying from one place to another, frantic meetings with local leaders and changing of plans until it was decided that Tipperary offered the best chance of success. Meagher, noted along the way that the destitute cottagers seemed to have lost all spirit.

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<sup>52</sup>Ibid., pp. 193-94.

<sup>53</sup>Quoted in Gwynn, Young Ireland, p. 230.

<sup>54</sup>Meagher, Meagher of the Sword, pp. 186-87.

Hunger and disease "had eaten their way into the soul itself."<sup>55</sup> Nevertheless large crowds of people turned out to cheer the rebel leaders on. Unfortunately, in at least one instance, the crowds were not aware exactly what it was they were cheering. In every instance a lack of arms and provisions made it impossible to organize a force of several hundred and move from one place to another. O'Brien would allow no looting or destruction of private property nor would he allow his lieutenants to promise rewards such as free land to prospective insurrectionists. Most critically the Catholic clergy in each community not only refused to encourage the local populace to rise, but actively discouraged their congregations from aiding the rebels. Still a number of barricades were built, a few shots exchanged and at least two Irishmen killed, before O'Brien was ready to admit defeat. By July 28 it was all over. O'Brien and Meagher were captured within a few days and the rising of '48 was at an end.<sup>56</sup>

The news reaching England was almost as confusing as the rising itself. On July 27, Lord John was attending the christening of his second son. The celebration was cut short by word that all the south of Ireland had rebelled and the army had mutinied. Russell hurried back to London; an emergency meeting of the cabinet was called. Lord Campbell described his appearance:

John Russell tried to look firm, but was evidently much appalled; and we were all in deep dismay. The Duke of Wellington was sent

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<sup>55</sup>Ibid., p. 203.

<sup>56</sup>The confused events of the five days from July 23 to 28 have been set down in personal accounts by many of the people who took part. Denis Gwynn has used them all in a massive re-telling in his Young Ireland, reprinting many intact. The above generalizations are taken from this source, pp. 227-321.

for, and orders were issued for pouring in reinforcements of infantry, cavalry, artillery, and ships of war from all quarters.

The orders were never carried out. Within a few hours more accurate reports of the action reached the government leaders and they were able to return to their normal pursuits.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>57</sup>Walpole, Life of Lord John Russell, II, 73.



## CHAPTER VII

### THE ASHES

"Independence is no longer  
the first achievement."  
-- Charles Gavan Duffy

An immediate result of the abortive rising was the decision of Lord John Russell to visit Ireland in late summer, 1848. He had not set foot on its soil in ten years even though, in 1848, the trip could be accomplished in less than a day. He spent only two weeks--and most of that conferring with Clarendon in Dublin. He made no attempt to inspect the famine devastated areas, leaving Dublin only briefly for a quick trip to Meath where he had some family property. Of this excursion his biographer says:

. . . though in driving from Dublin he saw many wretched cabins and much careless farming, the people seemed on the whole more prosperous than he had expected to find them.<sup>1</sup>

Russell's family accompanied him and on September 9, they all left Ireland for a month-long vacation in Scotland. While still in Ireland, Russell betrayed a regression to his old cure for Ireland. He wrote T. N. Redington, under-secretary for Ireland, and outlined a new plan to endow the Catholic clergy with funds to be derived from a new and separate Irish tax.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., II, 74-75.

<sup>2</sup>Russell to Redington, September 6, 1848, quoted in Gooch, Later Correspondence of Russell, I, pp. 230-31.

Of more immediate significance was the alarming news that the potato was failing again. Russell had been aware of this possibility since mid-August when he wrote Wood that he feared the crop would not be up to normal and suggested the Chancellor of the Exchequer begin planning for heavy relief expenditures<sup>3</sup>--a suggestion which Wood seems to have ignored. After the modest but healthy potato crop of 1847 the small farmers of Ireland had returned in a "frenzy of confidence" to the crop they knew best--the potato. Efforts to introduce alternate staple foods such as turnips, cabbages and beans were swept aside and forgotten as small occupiers sacrificed what personal belongings they still had to buy and plant seed potatoes.<sup>4</sup> It was all for nothing; the blight in 1848 was every bit as devastating as it had been at its height two years previously.<sup>5</sup>

Soon after Russell left for Scotland, O'Brien and Meagher came to trial at Clonmel, Tipperary. The charges were high treason. This time Isaac Butt did not defend O'Brien; it would have done no good. Butt did defend Meagher and spoke with his usual eloquence for the better part of two days.<sup>6</sup> The trials did not arouse the degree of excitement and patriotism as those of the previous May. O'Brien made a brief statement:

I am perfectly satisfied with the consciousness that I have performed my duty to my country--that I have done only that which, in my opinion, it was the duty of every Irishman to have done, . . . Proceed with your sentence.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Russell to Wood, August 13, 1848, quoted in Ibid., p. 229.

<sup>4</sup>Woodham-Smith, The Great Hunger, p. 361. <sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 362.

<sup>6</sup>White, The Road of Excess, pp. 137-38.

<sup>7</sup>Quoted in Gwynn, Young Ireland, p. 271.

Both he and Meagher were sentenced to be hanged, drawn and quartered-- the only punishment possible for high treason. The administration had no desire to see the sentence carried out and the prisoners were encouraged to petition the Queen to commute the sentence to transportation. O'Brien, characteristically, refused and a special law had to be passed through Parliament to enable the commutation. In July, 1849, O'Brien and Meagher began their voyage to Tasmania to join John Mitchel.<sup>8</sup>

Charles Gavan Duffy was the only one of the four who escaped conviction. Five times he was brought to trial; five times Isaac Butt's skillful challenging of prospective jurymen caused the government to delay. Finally in April, 1849, the prosecution was dropped and Duffy was allowed to return to the offices of the Nation, where he began to work for Irish relief again in a much-changed manner.<sup>9</sup>

While the rebels waited in prison for their trials, the great mass of Irishmen were once again starving. If they looked to London for relief they were to be disappointed. In 1848 and thereafter, the whole weight of relief for Irish distress was placed upon the Poor Law and, therefore, supported by Ireland's own resources. In August Russell had warned Clarendon, "the course of English benevolence is frozen by insult, calumny and rebellion."<sup>10</sup> More than just revenge for the attempted outbreak colored the Prime Minister's assessment of the chances for further

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid., and The Annual Register . . . 1849 (London: George Woodfall and Son, 1850), Chronicle, pp. 374-75.

<sup>9</sup>Gwynn, Young Ireland, p. 272, and White, The Road of Excess, p. 134. For a discussion of Duffy's new approach see below, p. 72.

<sup>10</sup>Quoted in Woodham-Smith, The Great Hunger, p. 366.

### English aid to Ireland:

In 1847, eight millions were advanced to enable the Irish to supply the loss of the potato crop and to cast about them for some less precarious food . . . The result is that they have placed more dependence on the potato than ever and have again been deceived. How can such a people be assisted?<sup>11</sup>

Nevertheless, during the closing months of 1848 Russell did try to develop a new program to solve some of the long-standing Irish grievances. His immediate plan to aid the Catholic church, conceived during his Irish visit, met such strong opposition within his own cabinet that Russell was forced to abandon it. He then turned to an extensive proposal to relieve the overpopulation problem by aiding emigration.<sup>12</sup> The number of people leaving Ireland increased dramatically after the famine began, almost tripling from 74,970 in 1845 to 219,885 in 1847.<sup>13</sup> To encourage this exodus Russell proposed to create a formal emigration commission financed by a new tax on property. Funds collected by this new tax would be distributed by the commission to anyone wishing to leave, and not able to pay his own way--as much as £2 per person. Russell had the "mortification" to find that even with this self-supporting plan he could not carry his own cabinet. He threatened to resign, a threat which apparently did not overawe his colleagues and was subsequently withdrawn.<sup>14</sup>

Thus, unable to control his own cabinet, Russell faced the new Parliament without a definite Irish program while conditions in Ireland

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<sup>11</sup>Quoted in Ibid., p. 409.

<sup>12</sup>Walpole, Life of Lord John Russell, II, 75-80.

<sup>13</sup>Arnold Schrier, Ireland and the American Emigration: 1850-1900 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1958), p. 157.

<sup>14</sup>Walpole, Life of Lord John Russell, II, 76-81.

reached the worst point since the famine began.<sup>15</sup> In February (1849) Russell admitted, "Things are in a very bad way here. The consequences of coming forward without a plan are beginning to be felt very seriously."<sup>16</sup> Finally, forced by the growing horror of the conditions in Ireland, the government relented and allowed a temporary emergency measure granting a loan of £100,000 over a two-year period; £50,000 was granted immediately. The aid was a loan and a new tax was levied on the already bankrupt Irish to repay it. Even a measure as mild and as obviously urgent as this nearly broke up Russell's cabinet with Lansdowne threatening to resign.<sup>17</sup> The only other significant piece of Irish legislation passed during 1849 was an amendment to the Encumbered Estates Act of the previous year facilitating the sale of bankrupt property.<sup>18</sup>

Russell fared a little better the following year. In 1850 he was at last able to deliver the long-promised reform of the Irish franchise adding 90,000 new voters to the existing rolls of 72,000.<sup>19</sup> However the number of Irish members of Parliament remained the same. Russell was also able to secure passage of a measure extending the time allowed for repayment of famine loans and introduced a measure to reorganize the Irish administration.<sup>20</sup> As it stood the administration of Ireland was a

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<sup>15</sup>Woodham-Smith, The Great Hunger, p. 377.

<sup>16</sup>Russell to Clarendon, February 8, 1849, quoted in Nowlan, The Politics of Repeal, p. 222.

<sup>17</sup>Walpole, Life of Lord John Russell, II, 82-84.

<sup>18</sup>Woodham-Smith, The Great Hunger, p. 409, and The Annual Register . . . 1849, p. 90.

<sup>19</sup>Whyte, The Independent Irish Party, p. 63.

<sup>20</sup>Walpole, Life of Lord John Russell, II, 86.

mixed system with the viceroy and his staff performing duties Russell thought could be more efficiently performed in London, since with improved transportation, "separate government within fifteen hours of London appears unnecessary." His bill passed two readings but was abandoned in August in the rush to complete parliamentary business by the end of the term.<sup>21</sup>

One more Russell measure deserves to be mentioned. Although it was not directly aimed at Ireland, the Ecclesiastical Titles Act had significant repercussions both in that country and in the manner in which Russell was able to perform the duties of his office. In 1850, Pope Pius IX reorganized the administration of his church in England renaming bishops for the communities they served. This seemingly innocent action resulted in a general outcry, many Anglicans accusing the Pope of attempting to usurp English prerogatives. Russell joined in the "no-papery" chorus calling the papal action "a pretension of supremacy over the realm of England."<sup>22</sup> He then drafted a bill prohibiting the use of English place-names in any Catholic title. This display of anti-Catholic policy created much resentment among members of that religion, particularly in Ireland. At the same time strong opposition to the Russell ministry was building in Parliament culminating in his temporary resignation late in 1851. Specifically because of his obdurate insistence on the Ecclesiastical Titles Act, Russell was unable to reform and strengthen his cabinet by bringing in men with wider support in Parliament. The opposition also

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<sup>21</sup>McDowell, The Irish Administration, pp. 67-68.

<sup>22</sup>Russell to the Bishop of Durham, November 4, 1850, quoted in Walpole, Life of Lord John Russell, II, pp. 120-21.

was not able to form a ministry and, at the Queen's request, Russell returned to office at the head of a much-weakened administration.<sup>23</sup> To a large extent his troubles in Parliament were caused by a coalition between Conservatives and a new force of Irish liberals calling themselves the Irish Brigade.<sup>24</sup>

Russell's parliamentary problems following the passage of the Ecclesiastical Titles Act reflected a change in direction in Irish efforts to achieve reform. The movement for repeal of the Act of Union had died, or rather had been transported to Tasmania. Charles Gavan Duffy, the one remaining revolutionary, wrote in the first issue of the resurrected Nation,

" . . . independence is no longer the first achievement . . . but the end and result of many practical victories . . . Our first practical effort ought to be to bring back Ireland to health and strength by stopping the system of extermination . . . ."25

This, Duffy believed, could best be accomplished through a strong and unified independent Irish party in Parliament.<sup>26</sup>

The "system of extermination" at which Duffy took aim was the Irish land system. Since the report of the Devon Commission, five years earlier, nothing had changed. The Irish smallholder's claim on his land and improvements was every bit as tenuous in 1850 as it was in 1845. In

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<sup>23</sup>Ibid., pp. 122-28. Russell had invited Sir James Graham and Lord Aberdeen to join his cabinet. Both refused on the ground of Russell's insistence on the Titles Bill.

<sup>24</sup>Whyte, The Independent Irish Party, pp. 21-22.

<sup>25</sup>Quoted in Nowlan, The Politics of Repeal, p. 230.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid.

fact Russell's Encumbered Estates Act amendment of 1849 had encouraged wholesale clearances on a much vaster scale--in 1849 some 90,000 had been forced off their land.<sup>27</sup> To combat this practice and to give the tenant some equity for his efforts local action had begun as early as 1847 to form self-protecting tenant leagues. It was to this cause that Duffy now addressed himself. Many more local leagues were formed during 1850 and by summer of that year the movement was "the outstanding feature of public life in the southern provinces."<sup>28</sup> Duffy, John O'Connell and three others joined together in the summer of 1850 to call a nationwide conference which resulted in the founding of the Irish Tenant League. The new organization immediately agreed on a three-point platform: tenants should be assured fair rent, they should have security of tenure as long as they paid their rent, and they should be allowed to sell their interest in their holdings for the best price they could secure. Furthermore, the league would support only those members of Parliament who would sign a written pledge that they would work for tenant reform.<sup>29</sup> To Duffy belongs the credit for originating the idea that Irish members also pledge themselves to accept no favors from whatever English administration happened to be in power.<sup>30</sup>

It was only natural that the Irish Brigade--formed to fight the Titles Bill--and the Irish Tenant League should combine and by 1852 they

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<sup>27</sup>Ibid., p. 219, and Woodham-Smith, The Great Hunger, pp. 409-10.

<sup>28</sup>Whyte, The Independent Irish Party, p. 6.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., pp. 12-13.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., pp. 10-11.



were working together in Parliament strengthened by that year's election of forty-eight Irish members pledged to independent opposition and the support of tenant right.<sup>31</sup> The new group found themselves, at times, in control of the balance of power in the badly fragmented Parliaments of the early eighteen-fifties. In 1852, for instance, combined with Whigs, Radicals and Peelites, they were able to defeat the short-lived Derby ministry. Within a few months, however, of this high point, factionalism developed within the party just as it had before in O'Connell's Repeal Association and, later, the Young Ireland group.<sup>32</sup>

Duffy, the onetime revolutionary, had been elected to Parliament in 1852, ironically the same year Russell's first ministry finally collapsed. Though Duffy worked as hard to organize and guide the independent Irish party as he had to inspire the nationalist cause, personal ambitions of some of the members often frustrated his efforts. Discouraged by growing factionalism in yet another Irish movement, Duffy resigned from politics in 1855 and emigrated to Australia. There, welcomed by the growing number of Irish exiles, he took on a whole new political career rising to Prime Minister of Victoria in 1871-72 and was knighted in 1873.<sup>33</sup> Duffy died in 1903.

Thomas Francis Meagher, also, achieved more after he left Ireland than during the years he worked for the nationalist cause. He escaped from Tasmania in 1852 and fled to New York City where he quickly became

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<sup>31</sup>Ibid., p. 32, and McCaffrey, The Irish Question, p. 73.

<sup>32</sup>Whyte, The Independent Irish Party, pp. 95-97.

<sup>33</sup>Dictionary of National Biography: Supplement, January, 1901-December, 1911 (London: Oxford University Press, 1912), I, 531-34.

a leader of the Irish community, was admitted to the bar and edited an Irish newspaper. At the outbreak of the Civil War, Meagher of the Sword was commissioned a captain at the head of a volunteer company of New York Irishmen. He rose to the rank of Brigadier General and led his Irish brigade through several battles including a particularly bloody engagement at Chancellorsville. At the close of the war President Johnson appointed Meagher acting governor of Montana Territory where he served briefly until his accidental death by drowning in 1867.<sup>34</sup>

John Mitchel followed Meagher to America, escaping from Tasmania in 1853. He also founded a newspaper in New York, but where Meagher's was Irish-centered, Mitchel found a new cause in defending pro-slavery interests and expanding his bitter journalism to attack Jewish emancipation. In 1875 he returned to his native Ireland and was twice elected to Parliament from Tipperary but was denied his seat since he was a convicted felon.<sup>35</sup> He died in 1875.

William Smith O'Brien was a broken man after the failure of the rising. His health was severely affected during his imprisonment in Tasmania, since unlike Mitchel and Meagher, he refused to promise the authorities he would not try to escape and was therefore kept in close confinement. Finally granted a full pardon in 1856, O'Brien returned to his home in Ireland, disillusioned and despondent. He died in 1864.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup>Dictionary of National Biography (London: Oxford University Press, 1937-38), XIII, 194-96.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., pp. 505-07.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., XIV, 777-81.

After defeat of his first ministry in 1852 Lord John Russell continued his long and checkered career in British government. He served first as Foreign Secretary in 1859 under Palmerston.<sup>37</sup> It was in this capacity that he issued the famous dispatch of October 27, 1860, in which Great Britain refused to join the other major European powers in condemning the Italian revolution. Basing the government's approval of Cavour's and Garibaldi's cause on the inherent justice of a popularly-based revolution, he said, "Looking at the question in this view, her Majesty's Government must admit that the Italians themselves are the best judges of their own interests."<sup>38</sup> It was a sentiment which must have been heard with ironic satisfaction by the four Irish ex-revolutionaries. Russell formed a brief second ministry on the death of Palmerston in 1865, retiring from politics the following year. He died in 1878, outliving all but one of the four revolutionaries.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup>Ibid., XVII, 454-63.

<sup>38</sup>Quoted in Walpole, Life of Lord John Russell, II, 326.

<sup>39</sup>Dictionary of National Biography, XVII, 454-63.

## CONCLUSION

William Smith O'Brien's charge that, "with Irish feelings this House has little sympathy--little knowledge of Irish wants, and still less disposition to provide for those wants," was just as true in 1853 as it had been when he made it ten years earlier. Many of the grievances O'Brien enumerated for Parliament in 1843 were still unresolved. Others which he had not touched on, such as the tenant-right problem, were equally short of solution.

Some things had changed. Russell's administration had made it painfully clear that Ireland must look only to itself in time of distress. Russell finally convinced himself that the famine had been an act of Providence and, by reducing her population, had been good for Ireland.<sup>1</sup> The nation's population had changed too, diminishing by about 1,600,000--a figure approximating the best estimates of the number of deaths resulting from the famine.<sup>2</sup> Irish discontent had hardened, and Young Ireland's idealism had given way to the terrorist methods of the Fenians. Repeal of the Act of Union was no longer looked on as a practical goal by Irish leaders.

Lord John Russell's Irish policy is often compared to that of his predecessor's, and found wanting. Certainly the victims of the

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<sup>1</sup>Hansard, 3d. ser., Vol. 105 (1849), pp. 419-25. Russell makes a concise defense of his administration's major famine measures--primarily on the basis of laissez faire economics.

<sup>2</sup>Woodham-Smith, The Great Hunger, pp. 411-12.

hardships in Ireland found Russell a handy focus for their hate. It should be remembered that in facing the famine, Peel's administration had experienced only a partial crop failure, while Russell had to cope with the complete loss of the main food supply of most Irishmen. By the time he took office Ireland's resources were exhausted, her people disorganized. Yet it is hard to fault Russell for lack of effort. The Irish question claimed a larger part of his time than any other foreign or domestic problem. The list of his accomplishments is sizeable enough to prove that his concern with Irish reform was genuine. Between 1830 and 1840 he had been instrumental in repealing the church cess (tax), broadening the availability of education in Ireland, bringing the New Poor Law to Ireland, and reforming the Irish municipal franchise. Under Peel he had supported the Maynooth grant and--for Irish reasons--the repeal of the Corn Laws. As Prime Minister he had even overcome his own laissez faire economic principles. (at least at first), broadened Peel's public works relief system, and then instituted his own soup kitchen program on a scale that shocked his associates. He abolished the Navigation Acts, and repealed the last duties on grain. He then succeeded in passing the Encumbered Estates Act, which eventually improved the health of Irish agriculture by reducing the number of small farmers. Finally, he was successful in further reforming the Irish franchise in 1850.

The list of Russell's unsuccessful proposals for Irish reform is even more impressive and significant. He failed in each of his attempts to partially disestablish the Church of Ireland and offer assistance to Irish Catholics. He tried unsuccessfully to financially encourage emigration, to control evictions, to guarantee tenant farmers compensation for

their improvements, to start a new public works program in 1848, and to reform the Irish administration. Thus, while he was able to offer some immediate aid during the famine, and to make progress in areas of reform that did not affect landed interests, he was frustrated in his efforts to strike at some of the roots of the Irish problem. The cause of Russell's failure must, in the last analysis, be laid to be his weakness in his cabinet, and the weakness during his administration of the Whigs in Parliament. On most of the issues where he failed Russell was unable to carry even his own cabinet. Without this strength it is remarkable that he succeeded to the degree that he did. If there is any room for criticism, it would have to be that, realizing this weakness, Russell insisted on remaining in office so long, allowing Ireland's major problems to continue unresolved. In 1848, the British Parliament was unresponsive to popularly-based causes, and without the strength of a leader such as Sir Robert Peel, it was unlikely that any cause, based as Ireland's was, on national interests, could succeed.

It does not seem likely that Russell recognized that his efforts on behalf of Ireland were failures. Writing from the safety of retirement, he assessed the Irish problem much in the same way as he had seen it while in office:

It is the right of a people to represent its grievances. It is the business of a statesman to devise remedies.

The wants of Ireland are real, and must be supplied. Her wishes are transitory and intemperate; they must be filtered till all impure and noxious matter is cleared away, and nothing is left but what is pure and wholesome.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Russell, Recollections and Suggestions, p. 192.

Russell's problem was that his "filtering" was faulty. He failed to learn the true condition of the Irish people, which he might have done by simply visiting the country often enough and seeing with his own eyes. Throughout his administration he continued to think of the Irish as a people who were naturally lazy and indifferent. More importantly, he failed to recognize Ireland's leaders, and work with them, letting their judgment and experience help him in the matter of a solution. He failed to realize that laissez faire economics would not solve Ireland's problems in the midst of a famine. Finally, he failed to realize that after the Catholic Emancipation Act the religious question in Ireland had become a symptom rather than a cause of the trouble.

If Russell was preoccupied by the issue of religion in Ireland, the same issue destroyed any chance the leaders of Young Ireland had for success. It was the sectarian nature of their appeal that alienated Young Ireland from the strength of the Repeal Association. Religion was also the issue which William Smith O'Brien later singled out as the most decisive factor in the failure of the insurrection which he led. When asked, in 1856, if he thought the people really would have fought at his side, he said, "Yes, if the priests had not influenced them."<sup>4</sup> Even if the priests had sided with Young Ireland it is questionable whether any revolution led by a man of O'Brien's character could have succeeded. Idealistic and aristocratic, he had too much sympathy for both his victims and his men to successfully direct a popular revolt.

Thus, lack of effective leadership was a major disability of the

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<sup>4</sup>Ryan, The Fenian Chief, p. 70.

Irish cause. The ineptness of the Young Irelanders was amply demonstrated when they allowed an issue as idealistic as the "peace resolutions" to cause them to lose support of the Repeal Association. Although Meagher and Duffy--and others of the Young Ireland group--carved out remarkable careers after 1848, at the time of the rising they certainly did not have the support of the mass of Irish people. After Daniel O'Connell's death, no one man could claim to represent Ireland. Even those who came closest to it--such as O'Brien--had little strength in Parliament since they could not control the Irish delegation. Given no encouragement by the administration, it is not surprising that they failed to understand and assist Russell as partners in a united effort to redress Irish grievances.

The most important contribution of the Young Ireland group was the spirit of national identity they helped to reawaken through the Nation. This much, at least, lived after them, and helped in the development of the movement that resulted in the eventual separation of Ireland from Great Britain.



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