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HUMAN
ENCUMBRANCES

Political Violence and the Great Irish Famine

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The vice which is inherent in our system of social and political economy is so subtle that it eludes all pursuit, that you cannot find or trace it to any responsible source. The man, indeed, over whose dead body the coroner holds an inquest, has been murdered, but no one killed him. There is no external wound, there is no symptom of internal disease. Society guarded him against all outward violence;—it merely encircled him around in order to keep up what is termed the regular current of trade, and then political economy, with an invisible hand, applied the air-pump to the narrow limits within which he was confined, and exhausted the atmosphere of his physical life. Who did it? No one did it, and yet it was done.

— John Hughes, A Lecture on the Antecedent Causes of the Irish Famine in 1847

“I got to figure,” the tenant said. “We all got to figure. There’s some way to stop this. It’s not like lightning or earthquakes. We’ve got a bad thing made by men, and by God that’s something we can change.”

— John Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath

This book begins from the position that both the genesis and effects of food crises, like the construction of food systems themselves, ought to be analysed and understood from within “the political realm of human affairs.” This phrase is gleaned from the political writings of Hannah Arendt, for whom “neither violence nor power is a natural phenomenon.” While Arendt insisted that “violence” and “power” are far from the same thing, she also admitted that nothing is more common than to find both forces operating in concert. “Even the most
despotic domination we know of,” she cautioned, “the rule of master over slaves, who always outnumbered him, did not rest on superior means of coercion as such, but on a superior organisation of power—that is, on the organized solidarity of the masters.”

Arendt’s comments, I want to suggest, provide an important background for understanding the nature of “political violence” and its role in the creation of famine. A person or population can be “dominated” through brute force, but they might also be dehumanised or reduced to a position of virtual rightlessness through harmful economic policies, debilitating institutional programmes, prejudicial legislative actions, or misguided political doctrines. In the first example, subjugation would require the repressive presence of a police force or an army; in the second instance, domination is achieved through greater organisation and political design, or what Arendt termed the “solidarity of the masters.”

This typology of political violence provides a helpful way to think about mass starvation. It is relatively easy, for example, to find cases where famines are the direct outcome of brute force. In the medieval period the ritual of “slash and burn” practised by retreating armies is an obvious case in point. And the ongoing crisis in Sudan provides a more recent illustration of the synergies between armed conflict and mass starvation. The violence of hunger can result from other sources, however, including, for instance, colonial policies, market crises, state and corporate food control, inequitable labour regimes, and so forth. These examples of “structural violence,” to use Paul Farmer’s helpful term, might not appear as obvious as a civil war or an armed conflict, but evidence shows that they are in fact a more common cause of protracted famine.

And herein lies the crux of a larger problem: not only are structural factors more difficult to identify, their complex and composite nature makes it very difficult to isolate and distinguish the parties responsible. To view, say, a bureaucratic system as the principal cause of a particular famine can generate the false view that neither agency nor design is involved in the catastrophe. This is not just a problem for scholars to ponder, as Pierre Spitz makes clear. Certain mechanisms like tariffs, poll taxes, rent systems, and usurious credit practices are easily iden-
tified as “extractive forces” that strip populations of their assets, leaving scarcity and hunger in their wake. In these situations the populations directly affected are usually able to identify those responsible—that is, tax collectors, moneylenders, large farmers, and landlords—a fact that explains why these figures are very often the target of agrarian violence. The complex character of other kinds of extractive forces, however (for example, price structures, declining terms of trade, or the rising costs of farm inputs), makes them far less easy to analyse and identify. In other words, the multifaceted and compound nature of political violence often renders its operations opaque.

Whilst the complexity of political violence needs to be recognised—and we owe a debt to Spitz, amongst others, for pointing this out—it would be wrong to deduce from this, as is often the case, that food crises simply happen. In his excellent book *The End of Food*, Paul Roberts, drawing on John Thackara’s work on urban sprawl, makes a very powerful point about food crises that is worth quoting at length:

Nobody seems to have designed urban sprawl, it just happens—or so it seems . . . On closer inspection, however, urban sprawl is not mindless at all. There is nothing inevitable about its development. Sprawl is the result of zoning laws designed by legislators, low density buildings designed by developers, marketing strategies designed by ad agencies, tax breaks designed by economists, credit lines designed by banks . . . data mining software designed by hamburger chains, and automobiles designed by car designers. The interactions between all these systems and human behaviour are complicated and hard to understand—but the policies are not the result of chance.

For Roberts, food crises, like the phenomenon of urban sprawl, are the outcome of a complex political process. Disasters do not happen; they are designed. Behind the structural causes of hunger lie the machinations of politicians, legislators, workhouse guardians, usurious creditors, apathetic landowners, and utopian economists. The challenge is to determine the key sites of agency and action from the “sprawl” of compound forces.
The interaction between cognitive designs and human decisions—between ideology and conduct—is a central feature of what I describe in this book as political violence. In many ways, as we shall discuss, the Irish Famine was viewed as an instrument of cure, a form of social prophylaxis, that would finally regenerate what was perceived to be a diseased body politic. Even before the Famine reached its deadly apogee, a wide array of social commentators believed that Ireland’s peasant culture (hinged on a “degenerate” potato diet) was fundamentally incommensurable with enlightenment norms of civilisation and progress. Objectified as a “redundant” people, Irish peasants were thought to be preventing the long-term modernisation of Irish society. To the economists and public officials who embraced this dehumanising logic, the potato blight was literally a godsend: a “secret scourge,” to adapt a well-known phrase from Edmund Spenser, that would mark the beginning of a process of political, social, and economic amelioration in Ireland.6 A great deal has been written about such providential readings of the Famine, but another reason why these claims gained political currency was that they drew on an earlier colonial ideology that equated civility with the imposition of English norms and values. That is, to be civilised Irish society must be anglicised, and for this to happen the soil must be swept of its human encumbrances.7

For these reasons I place particular emphasis on the role of colonisation as a factor in the genesis and progression of famine in Ireland. The occlusion of colonisation (both as an ideology and as a practice) is often bemusing to scholars viewing Irish studies from the “outside,” where potent connections are frequently drawn between events in Ireland and subsistence crises in the colonised regions of the global south. Here special mention needs to be made of Michael Watts’s pioneering work on northern Nigeria and Mike Davis’s seminal study, Late Victorian Holocausts.8 In different ways, both accounts explain how colonial occupation, confiscation, and displacement left local populations bereft of the means of production and thrust back onto precarious modes of subsistence. In addition to undermining residual safety nets and coping mechanisms, colonial ideologies produced formidable boundaries between “ruler” and “ruled” that severely attenuated, and sometimes negated, more positive humanitarian impulses.
The emphasis in this volume, therefore, is on the importance of engaging in comparative analysis, particularly with regard to the institutional responses to famine across the British Empire. Without denying the specificity of the Irish Famine, there are clear lessons to be drawn from other colonial contexts. Writing in 1880, for example, as India was experiencing a series of catastrophic famines, Charles Trevelyan told readers of the *Times* that the earlier events in Ireland were “full of instruction on the present occasion.”9 “At the commencement of the Irish Famine,” Trevelyan recalled, “there was the same popular desire to prohibit the exportation of grain, but it was successfully resisted.” By adhering to orthodox economic theories, “a great famine was stayed, and the stamina of the population was restored.”10 “The result in Ireland,” concluded Trevelyan, “has been to introduce other better kinds of food, and to raise the people, through much suffering, to a higher standard of subsistence. We shall see how it will be in India.”11 It is indeed peculiar that modern scholars have been reluctant to pursue the colonial connections that were so regularly rehearsed by well-known Victorian commentators.12

As well as threading together what might first appear as discrete historical and geographical phenomena—“first” and “third world” hunger—my argument also develops key insights originating from the relatively new and vibrant field of “Famine Studies.”13 This work includes the “entitlements framework” developed by the Nobel Prize–winning economist Amartya Sen (including emerging critiques of Sen’s methodology), as well as a very diverse corpus of work that falls under the conceptual umbrella of political ecology.14 With one or two notable exceptions, this scholarship has been ignored in recent accounts of the Great Irish Famine. There is, I want to suggest, a significant “opportunity cost” to overlooking this body of theoretical work, not only for researchers working on Irish Studies but also for those scholars labouring on the politics of hunger in the present. It does not seem to me too fanciful to suggest that analysing an historical famine might help us to better understand contemporary hunger and food insecurity; as the pioneering economist George O’Brien recognised, “the distress of the lower classes in Ireland in the early nineteenth century is a commonplace not merely of Irish but of world

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history.” And, in much the same way, more recent case studies and conceptual innovations might cast new light on the Irish past.

I should add that although I incorporate postcolonial and modern famine theories to support the claims made in this book, I am primarily motivated by the interpretations offered by contemporaries (principally British and Irish observers but also American and European commentators) who vehemently protested against the injustice of famine and the suffering of the Irish people. The record of these disagreements comprises a rich and valuable trove of contemporary famine theory developed in situ and in response to specific grievances. While the intellectual basis for these critiques was quite diverse (republican, anticolonial, socialist, philanthropic, and so on), the crucial point is to acknowledge the presence of famine theories that predate the advance of modern Famine Studies. The tendency to attribute social failings to “natural” environmental causes or to judge famines as “the fiat of the Almighty,” for instance, was both undermined and satirised by a number of Victorians. In fact, many of the cornerstones of famine theory today—including the distinction between the immediate antecedents and the deeper underlying or structural causes of famine—were made with remarkable sophistication by contemporary observers. Although the “entitlements framework” and postcolonial perspectives help to develop a substantial critique of British famine policy, they certainly are not a precondition for this critique.

The reclamation of these contemporary voices is also a powerful antidote to the still prevalent belief that the Irish Famine was in some way “inevitable.” This view comes perilously close to the Malthusian view—popular though fiercely contested in the nineteenth century—that famines are a “natural” outgrowth of unrestrained reproduction. Too many people plus too little food equals famine, as David Arnold condensed the problem. Although arguments about population size are not inconsequential (the reasons for population growth certainly deserve scrutiny), it is simply erroneous to think that hunger and mass mortality were utterly unavoidable. Not everyone fiddled while Rome burned, and to insist otherwise is to confuse fatalism with historicism. More seriously, this view diminishes the significance of political decision making—in terms of directing specific
outcomes—and renders irrelevant the aspirations of those who consistently disputed the discourses and policies of the British government. Being mindful of the pitfalls of teleology (what E. P. Thompson memorably described as the "enormous condescension of posterity"), this book tries to restore—and indeed amplify—those voices usually thought to be at the margins of mainstream political and economic opinion.19 From the perspective of these witnesses, the Irish Famine, and its attendant social miseries, was a direct consequence of human affairs—"a humiliating homily on modern state-craft," according to Archibald Stark, and an act of "class extinction," in S. G. Osborne’s view.20 Indeed, from a diversity of perspectives, “famine” enters the political imaginary not as a “natural scourge” of the population but as a crisis of government.

Finally, the fact that many of these critical statements hail from English observers reveals another important point: disapproval of British famine policy was never the exclusive product of nationalist analysis. As Catherine Nash insists, power and violence are contested in the centre as well as the periphery.21 Nash’s sharp observation is well illustrated in the persistent challenges to the dominant aetiology of famine and through the stubborn insistence that there is nothing “natural” about “natural disasters.” There are, clearly, alternative worlds of political critique, parallel to the dominant one, that need to be taken seriously if we are to restore the contingency of history and see the past anew as a site of possibility.22 Although the significance of different perspectives and countervailing voices might appear obvious enough—after all, the pauper and politician will scarcely view hunger in the same way—I hope to show that these differences offer a rich critique of the positivistic orthodoxies that have dominated the historiography of the Great Irish Famine.
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Memory from my childhood is the very strong emphasis my parents placed on my schooling. In secondary school, when I was struggling to keep up, extra tuitions were paid for without the slightest complaint. Later in adult life, when most of my peers were busy working toward promotion, my parents encouraged me to pursue my doctorate, even though this meant sacrificing their own retirement plans, not to mention long overdue holidays. I am truly at a loss to find the right words to acknowledge the near-pathological concern they have shown for my well-being over the years. They have had to put up with much, in return for so little, and all with consummate grace and good humour. I am so very grateful for all that they have done to educate and nurture me.

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Introduction
Colonial Biopolitics and the Functions of Famine

In Ireland the consequence was Famine—a calamity which cannot befall a civilised nation; for a civilised nation . . . never confines itself to a single sort of food, and is therefore insured from the great scarcity by the variety of its sources of supply. When such a calamity does befall an uncivilised community, things take their course; it produces great misery, great mortality, and in a year or two the wound is closed, and scarcely a scar remains.

—Nassau William Senior, Journals, Conversations and Essays Relating to Ireland, Volume 1

Dark whisperings and rumours of famine in its most appalling form began to reach us, but still we could scarcely believe that men, women, and children were actually dying of starvation in their thousands. Yet so it was. They died in their mountain glens, they died along the sea-coast, they died on the roads, and they died in the fields; they wandered into their towns, and died in the streets; they closed their cabin doors, and lay down upon their beds, and died of actual starvation in their houses.

—William Steuart Trench, Realities of Irish Life

Traumatic History

In 1843 a mysterious blight, now known as Phytophthora infestans, was observed in the potato harvest in America. Within two years the blight had crossed the Atlantic (most likely on a freight ship), quickly spreading
to many parts of Europe and first appearing in Dublin in August 1845. Over the next five years the Irish potato crop failed four times, the exception being the year commonly referred to as Black ’47. During this period one million Irish people perished—approximately one-eighth of the population—while an additional two million ploughed the seas in search of new beginnings in places as far-flung as Canada, the United States, Australia, England, Scotland, New Zealand, South Africa, and further afield. Thus, in a relatively short period of time, three million people—largely destitute smallholders, cottier tenants, and day labourers—were either dead or gone.¹

The sojourn of Phytophthora infestans, the potato-killing pathogen, to Irish shores was in itself unremarkable (figure I.1). Indeed, parts of Belgium, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and Scandinavia, not to mention North America, were also affected.² In regions where potatoes were an extensive part of inhabitants’ diet, as in the Scottish

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¹ Bourke, "The Visitation of God," 142
² Ibid.
Highlands, the crisis was acute and starvation deaths occurred in significant numbers. In Ireland, however, the failure of the potato harvest resulted in national rather than regional calamity. Historian Peter Gray has said that “no peacetime European crisis since the seventeenth century, with the possible exception of the Ukrainian famine in the early 1930s, has equalled it in intensity or scale”; and more recently the Indian economist Amartya Sen has argued that the mortality rate during the Great Famine was higher than in any other recorded famine, anywhere in the world. Certainly the Famine was larger than anything the European continent had endured for centuries, blunting John Post’s suggestion that the earlier food crisis of 1816–17 was the “the last great subsistence crisis in the Western world.”

The occurrence of a mass famine in Ireland, at a time when European subsistence crises were thought to be a relic of the past, continues to provoke acrimonious debate. Especially controversial is the relationship between Ireland and Great Britain. As the Great Famine drew to a close, over one million international visitors poured into London to witness the Great Exhibition (1851), where Britain’s “technical, industrial and financial supremacy” was proudly arranged and displayed. The exhibition was a spectacular reminder that the catastrophe of famine occurred when Ireland was constitutionally linked to Great Britain, considered by contemporaries to be the “workshop of the world” and a beacon of democratic government, with one of the most socially interventionist governments of its day. The question remains, How could one of the world’s worst famines occur in the backyard of the world’s most economically advanced nation?

**Between the Stomach and the Purse: The Aetiology of Famine and the Politics of Blame**

Modern scholars tend to agree that famines do not necessarily begin with crop failures, droughts, or equivalent climatic hazards; rather, their violence is coordinated much earlier, when a population is made progressively vulnerable or slowly brought to the point of collapse. According to this aetiology of hunger, droughts, floods, and crop failures...
are “trigger factors,” though not necessarily an “underlying cause,” of famine. For David Arnold famines are “a symptom rather than a cause of social weakness,” a viewpoint that raises deeper questions concerning social and economic inequality, collective vulnerability, and uneven power relations.

Despite the fact that the Great Irish Famine is now a major field of scholarly enquiry, there has been little attempt to engage with these critical perspectives, which are derived principally from famine experiences in colonial and postcolonial contexts. Cormac Ó Gráda acknowledges that “themes central to mainstream famine history research have until recently been ignored in Irish work.” Ó Gráda references in particular Sen’s distinguished treatment of famines as “entitlement failures” and Ambirajan’s consideration of colonial bureaucracy and classical political economy, neither of which has been greatly discussed in what Ó Gráda characterises as the “serious” literature on the Irish Famine.

This lack of attention to a “comparative phenomenology of famine” may partly explain the resilience of historical accounts emphasising the “natural” causes of the Irish Famine. Lingering neo-Malthusian arguments claiming that nineteenth-century Ireland was overpopulated (and, therefore, a cull through mass starvation was largely unavoidable) are an extreme case in point. More common is the tendency to focus attention on the sudden shock of the potato blight, a move that implicitly, if not explicitly, assigns the real meaning of events to an unruly nature. For instance, one popular account of the Great Famine claims that Irish deaths were the result of “a tragic ecological accident.” “In the end,” the author concludes, “the Irish were desperately unlucky.” More recently, the Famine has been characterised as a series of “malign coincidences,” a phrase that appears to echo this environmental reading. Similar to Malthusian arguments, these accounts place the events of the Famine beyond blame because, as Eagleton writes, “a blankly indifferent Nature is not even enough of a subject to be malevolent.”

Besides attributing social failings to natural causes, another tactic of deflecting blame is to suggest that it is unfair—even “anachronistic”—to pass judgement on state officials who viewed the Fam-
ine as an “act of God,” or condemn civil servants who zealously supported market responses to Famine management, on the grounds that such views were “commonplace” in the mid-nineteenth century. For instance, Margaret Crawford argues that it is “simply anachronistic” to think that the state “could have interfered with private markets,” while Mary Daly believes that it would be inappropriate “to pronounce in an unduly critical fashion on the limitations of previous generations.”

Woodham-Smith concluded her classic account with a caveat similar to Mary Daly’s, while Robin Haines has argued that Charles Trevelyan’s (1807–86) providential reading of the Famine was “theologically commonplace” and should therefore be excused.

In raw form these charges of “anachronism” imply that we should be less critical of ideologies that were popularly endorsed by the Victorians. This moral relativity is deeply problematic, however. The fact that many people approved of slavery and supported racial apartheid—to take two separate examples—tells us absolutely nothing about its propriety. As Hannah Arendt has noted, critical judgement is an act of great political importance—an argument that is as true today as it would have been in the 1840s.

Furthermore, the allegation of “anachronism” seriously underestimates contemporary expressions of moral outrage made by English and Irish peers. In the House of Commons, for example, the leader of the opposition, George Bentinck (1802–48), charged that “They [the government] know the people have been dying in their thousands and I dare them to enquire what has been the number of those who have died through their mismanagement, by their principles of free trade, yes, free trade in the lives of Irish people.”

The English traveller James Johnson (1777–1845) observed a popular refutation of providential reasoning and a tendency to consider hunger as a social phenomenon: “It would require philosophy—and ‘something more,’” he exclaimed, “to convince the sufferers or even...
the bye-standers, that this stupendous inequality in the lot of mankind, is the fiat of the Almighty, and not the effect of some injustice in human laws.”

The scepticism of the “sufferers” was shared by several observers of Irish events. “Is this [Famine] to be regarded in the light of a Divine dispensation and punishment?” asked the Quaker William Bennett (1804–73). “Before we can safely arrive at such a conclusion,” he reasoned, “we must be satisfied that human agency and legislation, individual oppression, and social relationships, have had no hand in it.” In a public lecture, Catholic Archbishop John Hughes (1797–1864) dismissed the view that this was “God’s Famine,” blaming instead “the invisible but all-pervading divinity of the Fiscal, the unseen ruler of the temporal affairs of this world.”

Hughes contrasted the new “political economy” (“the free system,—the system of competition, the system of making the wants of mankind the regulator for their supplies”) with what he defined as a more progressive “social economy” (“that effort of society, organized into a sovereign state, to accomplish the welfare of all its members”). Hughes went on to distinguish the “antecedent circumstances and influences” from the “primary, original causes” of hunger, thus anticipating, by nearly a century and a half, the general theoretical thrust of modern Famine Studies.

Similar arguments were advanced by English critics when faced with the problem of food shortages in Britain. In a searing account of the food crises following the conclusion of the Napoleonic Wars, the economist John Wheatley (1772–1830) maintained that the widespread deprivation was not the result of a “Visitation from Heaven,” nor the “blow of a foreign enemy,” nor had it “originated in [natural] calamities, against which human foresight could provide.” Having dismissed his fellow economists for fastening blame to such easy targets, Wheatley went on to impugn the “blind policy” and “incapacity of [government] Ministers” who both produced and exacerbated the
food crises by doing “nothing they ought to have done, and every
thing they ought not to have done.” “It is not easy,” Wheatley reprimanded, “to forgive ourselves for having so tamely and needlessly
submitted to their errors.” Although he was a vociferous advocate for
free trade, Wheatley’s judgement of his peers and their “tame” sub-
mission to what he considered to be false dogmas (blaming in turn
“nature,” “foreign enemies,” and “providence”) shows that sophis-
ticated appraisals of subsistence crises were available to Victorians
decades before the Great Irish Famine. Indeed, many of the themes
addressed by Wheatley were subsequently developed in the political
writings of the Young Irelanders—not to mention certain critical
comments collected within the Parliamentary Papers, memories as-
sembled in the folk archive, and the opinions of numerous travel writ-
ters, pamphleteers, and contemporary observers—who in a commen-
surate way protested against the blind policies and meek submissions
they witnessed in the 1840s. The point made here is that from the pres-
et perspective, what might seem to be an incontestable orthodoxy
or dominant ideology was in truth challenged and undermined from
a range of contemporary standpoints.

Nonetheless, the question of “anachronistic” viewpoints is not
simply a matter of historical accuracy. The tendency to underplay the
disputes over environmental and providential readings of famine (or
the propensity to consider laissez-faire doctrines as an immutable fact)
naturalises the violence of hunger by obscuring the role of actors and
agents in securing particular outcomes. Take, for instance, Crawford’s
view that it is historically inaccurate to believe that the government
could have interfered with private markets. Crawford’s claim is only
tenable if one ignores a vast body of evidence demonstrating direct
government interposition to maintain the sanctity of private property
and to support a system of propertylessness. Critics such as the English
MP George Poulett Scrope never tired of singling out the hypocrisy
of such “laissez-faire” pronouncements:

It is a common fallacy—though a very natural one for an English-
man to be deluded by—to deprecate all interference between
landlord and tenant, as contrary to sound economical principle,
which “should leave their relations to be determined by voluntary
For Scrope, laissez-faire economics does not imply that “everything is left alone.” In contradistinction to neoclassical theories, the liberalisation of the food system—“not interfering, allowing freedom of movement, letting things take their course”—is made possible through the meticulous elimination of all non-market behaviour that is considered aberrant or undesirable. Indeed, laissez-faire was not only “planned,” as Karl Polanyi famously insisted; its imposition required an increase in repressive measures, as labourers, peasants, and smallholders were forced to bear the costs of market regulation. The assumption that markets are “natural systems” operating outside of power and politics is itself an invention of the nineteenth century.

It stands from this that if “free markets” are the product of human design, they must have a history and geography—and a fraught one at that, if we are to treat Polanyi’s arguments with the seriousness they deserve. Before the dominance of laissez-faire, most European governments (and indeed many societies beyond Europe) operated what Michel Foucault has described as an “anti-scarcity system.” Foucault is alluding to the customary mechanisms or traditional entitlements for ensuring that interventions in times of dearth were considered “an inevitable extension of general state functions.” The means of accomplishing these so-called moral economies differed substantially between societies, but they more often than not included a mixture of price controls, limitations on exportations, proscriptions against hoarding, the operation of public granaries, the duty-free import of victuals, and prohibitions on the use of provisions for the distillation of alcohol. Significantly, these practices were considered preventative rather than remedial. In other words, the maintenance of an “anti-scarcity system” was designed to stop food shortages from occurring in the first place.
However, the tensions between a nation’s subsistence and the “economic management of society” become increasingly evident in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, first in the doctrines of the physiocratic politicians in France and later in the writings of free market theorists like Adam Smith (1723–90) and David Ricardo (1772–1823) in Britain. In France the panoply of measures formerly used to guarantee stocks and promote grain price stabilisation were gradually abolished in favour of techniques designed to enhance the free circulation of provisions and capital. This new programme of regulation was the “practical consequence of economic theories” advocating that the “free circulation of grain was not only a better source of profit, but also a much better mechanism of security against the scourge of scarcity.”

The guiding tenets of economic liberalism were also making political inroads in Britain. In a letter directed to the statesman William Pitt (1759–1806) and entitled *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity*, Edmund Burke (1729–97) relates the issue of food supply—“one of the finest problems in legislation”—to the subject of responsible government. For Burke public provision in times of dearth was both naïve and dangerous: “Of all things, an indiscreet tampering with the trade of provisions is the most dangerous, and it is always worst in the time when men are most disposed to it: that is, in the time of scarcity.” According to Adam Smith, restricting the freedoms of the market by “the violence of government” was the most certain method of prolonging famine. Similarly, David Ricardo’s views on comparative advantage—suggesting that regions and states should specialise in a single niche product to gain a competitive edge—reinforced the case for interdependent global markets and unrestricted private enterprise. Referring euphemistically to the “Irish emergency of 1847,” the liberal economist J. S. Mill (1806–73) endorsed market mechanisms as the optimal scheme for addressing food scarcity. In his widely praised *Principles of Political Economy*, Mill warned against “direct measures at the cost of the state, to procure food,” favouring instead “private speculation.” These pronouncements reflected the class interests of a newly politicised urban bourgeoisie, who resented measures designed to promote price stabilisation and guarantee food stocks because these same methods
might also precipitate adverse exchange rates, restrictions on credit, and even runs on banks. In general, as governments promoted the class interests of merchants and industrialists, they became less willing to interfere in food markets in order to protect poor peasants. The question of collective food provisioning was fast turning into a political war between the stomach and the purse.

It is important to underscore the extent to which laissez-faire doctrines represented a sea change from the “anti-scarcity systems” that dominated food structures before the nineteenth century. During the severe famine of 1740–41, for example, an embargo was placed on food exports from Irish ports, while Parliament prevented severe scarcity once again in 1765 by prohibiting exports of corn and the distillation of alcohol. Similar food embargoes were enacted by most European governments during the subsistence crisis in 1816–17. In the Netherlands, for example, the government allocated 6 million florins for the purchase of rye; the French government spent 164 million francs on imported provisions, whilst the British authorities imported 700,000 quarters of grain (much of it commandeered from Ireland) to address acute shortages in England. In Europe such interpositions were essential for keeping overall mortality levels similar to seventeenth-century famines.

The history of the 1743–44 relief campaign in Zhili (now Hebei), China, demonstrates that similar “anti-scarcity” policies were common in supra-European contexts as well. According to Pierre-Etienne Will, two million peasants were maintained for over eight months until the return of the monsoon made agricultural production possible again. Indeed, Will estimates that 85 percent of the relief grain was shipped from tribute depots or public granaries located outside the main area of drought. This was a massive government-assisted campaign of food redistribution. To cope with the pressures of harsh climatic conditions, peoples in the Hausaland district of northern Nigeria were encouraged to develop farming practices and redistributive systems to ensure their collective food security. And in India, prior to the imposition of colonial doctrines and laissez-faire principles, the “importation of food, fixation of maximum prices and punishment and/or torture of offending grain dealers were the usual methods employed in fight-
ing famines.” Obviously, these examples demonstrate very different kinds of “anti-scarcity” programmes, ranging from government policies (geared toward redistributive food relief and risk mitigation) to household and communal strategies (directed toward mutual dependence and collective provisioning). Notwithstanding these differences, the evidence suggests a surprisingly broad recognition of what might be described as an implicit “right to food.”

In one of the earliest reflections on the Irish Famine, Anna Parnell (1852–1911) drew attention to the abnegation of government responsibility for food provisioning that laissez-faire implied:

In old times the duty of the ruler to protect his subjects from extermination by hunger was taken for granted. When Joseph had interpreted Pharaoh’s dream to him, Pharaoh did not talk about political economy, or disturbing the balance of economic conditions, or of laws of supply and demand, but passed at once to the question of meeting the evils foreshadowed by Joseph, whose advice he promptly and successfully acted on . . . it is rather interesting to compare the ideas of the old Pharaoh and those of Queen Victoria regarding the obligations of sovereigns.

The point of Parnell’s comparison is quite evident: historically the right to food was guaranteed through political action rather than the hidden hand of the market. The erosion of this “anti-scarcity system,” and its gradual replacement by a liberal market economy, is the crucial context for assessing the deficiencies of the government’s relief programmes and the vexed question of food supply and exportation during the Great Irish Famine. Although there is a general consensus that British famine relief was remarkably parsimonious (Donnelly condemned the “endowed but miserly treasury,” and Mokyr described the government’s relief funds as a “mere pittance”), discussions of food availability and supply are considerably more polarised. The Irish republican John Mitchel (1815–75) notoriously claimed that “a government ship sailing into any harbour with Indian corn was sure to meet half a dozen sailing out with Irish wheat and cattle,” and in the House of Commons Irish landlord William Smith O’Brien (1803–64) protested
that “the people were starving in the midst of plenty, and that every
tide carried from the Irish ports corn sufficient for the maintenance
of thousands of the Irish people.” The economic historian Cormac
Ó Gráda disagrees with these claims, arguing that the issue of “grain
exports is of more symbolic than real importance” and that “food
imports dwarfed food exports” during the famine period. Transferring
all the grains to the starving masses, Ó Gráda maintains, would
have made “only a small dent” in the nutritional gap left by the po-
tato, leading him to conclude that the Irish Famine was “a classic case
of food shortage.”

By contrast, historian Christine Kinealy has strongly condemned
the “food shortage” thesis. “The Irish poor did not starve because
there was an inadequate supply of food within the country,” she writes;
“they starved because political, commercial and individual greed was
given priority over the saving of lives in one part of the United King-
dom.” Kinealy argues that the historical emphasis on the exporta-
tion of “grain” actually amounts to a focus on corn, ignoring the ex-
portation of other foodstuffs from Irish ports, particularly oats (already
the largest item exported in 1841), wheat, and large quantities of live-
stock. Calls to prohibit the exportation of these provisions, Kinealy
reminds us, were met “very coldly” by the British government. Sec-
ondly, the continued distillation of alcohol—which requires grain—
amounted to what Kinealy calls an “averted supply of food.” In 1847
alone, 7,952,076 gallons of spirits were exported from Irish ports.56
Similarly, the fattening of livestock on foods that could have been con-
sumed by humans distanced resources from nutritional needs. Fur-
thermore, the Navigation Laws, which legislated that food must be im-
ported on board British ships, remained in place until January 1847,
contributing to exorbitant freight charges and what Kinealy terms an
“artificial shortage of shipping.” Finally, it should be remembered
that the Famine years marked a difficult period for most European
governments, with several reacting by (temporarily) limiting the exporta-
tion of staple foods. At the very least these arguments show that
what was offered to Ireland in terms of relief was drastically inadequate,
and what was withheld from Ireland, by dogmatically insisting on the
principles of free trade and “noninterference” in Irish food markets,
had deadly repercussions for the poorest and most vulnerable members of Irish society. In sum, the government showed no inclination to initiate anything resembling the traditional “anti-scarcity” measures used to mitigate the worst horrors of famine around the world.

The artificial encouragements to free trade, outlined above, make it difficult to support the view that laissez-faireism amounted to a crude policy of noninterference or that the market functioned as a “natural” regulator of social life. The late suspension of the Navigation Act, the closure of Irish food depots, the repeal of the Corn Laws, the Rate-in-Aid Acts, the failure to prohibit food exports, and the enactment of the Gregory Clause, which facilitated the legal confiscation of Irish property—all are evidence of a series of politico-economic interventions designed to regulate trade and relief in favour of specific outcomes. When looked into a little, it becomes evident that laissez-faire was a policy choice: it required a liberal, future-oriented, and proactive administration rather than the conservative and reactive outlook that “nonintervention” seems to imply. Hence one of the principal aims of this book is to extend David Keen’s thesis that famines have functions as well as causes. The fact that some people are denied entitlement to food—and are as such “entitled to starve”—is the result of governments upholding the rights of some at the expense of others.

The point that “the law stands between food availability and food entitlement” and that famines may reflect what Sen calls “legality with a vengeance” was forcefully underlined by contemporary observers of Irish affairs. Discussing the legal processing of famine evictions, Scrope asked, “Does the law, then, protect the Irish peasant?” And then answering his own question, “Not from starvation!”:

All is done in the sacred name of the law. The sheriff, the representative of the majesty of the law, is the actual exterminator. The officers of the law execute the process. The constabulary, acting under the orders of the magistracy, stand by to prevent resistance; and, if any is expected, the Queen’s troops are brought to the spot to quell, with all the power of the Throne, what would amount to an act of rebellion. It is absurd to cast the blame of these foul deeds, and the horrible results, upon a few reckless,
bankrupt landlords. It is to the law, or rather the Government and legislature which uphold it, and refuse to mitigate its ferocity, that the crime rightly attaches; and they will be held responsible for it by history, by posterity—aye, and perhaps before long, by the retributive justice of God, and the vengeance of a people infuriated by a barbarous oppression, and brought at last TO BAY by their destroyers.66

Scrope was not the first to condemn the sovereign violence of the law, nor was he alone in suggesting that famine deaths—resulting from evictions and land clearances—were the positive outcome of policy and ideology.67 Isaac Butt (1813–79) described “free trade” as a legislative experiment, which meant that “for the first time [the Irish people] started into existence as elements of calculation in the economic problem of the supply of Ireland’s food.”68 These observers recognised that the blight triggered a massive subsistence crisis, but at the same time they thought it unjust to ignore the considerable impact of fiscal, administrative, and legislative policies that obviously contributed to Irish suffering.

Despite what is said about so-called natural disasters, in practice calamities tend to authorise a high degree of political control and intervention. Indeed, as I wish to argue, the modern association between disaster and opportunity—the idea that famines can serve a strategic function—recapitulates earlier colonial arguments about “improving” and “anglicising” Irish society. The assistant secretary to the treasury, Charles Trevelyan, reminded readers of this fact when he approvingly cited the poet Edmund Spenser, who in the seventeenth century declared that “some secret scourge” was necessary for the regeneration of Ireland.69 Like other key figures in government, Trevelyan came to view state relief as a Benthamite “science,” which if orchestrated correctly could improve the habits of a rebarbative people and launch the “transition” from subsistence farming to agrarian capitalism. This belief in a redemptive crisis took hold in powerful sections of government and civil society. In addition, politico-cultural factors such as racial stereotyping (especially pseudo-biological accounts of poverty and racialised understandings of “redundant labour”) became key components in discursively reproducing “bare lives” in need of historical transforma-
tion. I want to argue that this suturing of disaster and improvement actually encouraged the state to become closely involved in the “administration of bodies” and the “calculated management of life.” Drawing on the ideas of Michel Foucault, I term this colonial biopolitics.

Colonial Biopolitics

The concepts “biopower” and “biopolitics” were first systematically theorised by Foucault in the last chapter of his well-known study *The History of Sexuality*. There Foucault explains how both the principle of government and the exercise of sovereignty acquired a new, modern meaning by the end of the eighteenth century. Prior to this period, “government” usually meant managing a territory and controlling its inhabitants, while the principal characteristic of sovereign power was the right to decide over life and death. The power of the sovereign over individual lives was an ancient right named “*patria potestas*” that granted the father of the Roman family the right to ‘dispose’ of the life of his children and his slaves. In time sovereign power was gradually diminished or circumscribed, until only the defence of the sovereign and his continued survival justified its invocation. If external enemies threatened the sovereign he could legitimately wage war and require his subjects to take part in the defence of the state. Without directly proposing their death, he was empowered to “expose” their life to likely fatality: “Power in this instance was essentially a right of seizure: of things, time, bodies, and ultimately life itself; it culminated in the privilege to seize hold of life in order to suppress it.”

Foucault subsequently developed these preliminary thoughts on modern government to include what he called “biopolitics,” defined as the careful control and supervision of life, death, and biological being—a form of politics that places human life at the very centre of its calculations. By the nineteenth century, Foucault claims, sovereign power takes control of life in order to reinforce and optimise its existence rather than to seize and suppress it. This does not mean that the “old power of death” is totally abandoned but rather that violence must now be justified by the “notion of improvement.” As evidence of this important shift in governance, Foucault points to the rise of mercantilism.
(followed by the promotion of a capitalist economy), the birth of statistics, the science of demography, and the rapid spread of public health campaigns in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. A biopolitical regime of governance is therefore a very general form of population management, which obviously has significant implications for our understanding of state power and sovereignty vis-à-vis subject populations.

Significantly, in a series of lectures on food provisioning, Foucault argues that the new emphasis on the vitality and improvement of populations does not mean that famines and other catastrophes will be prevented in the future; on the contrary, he suggests that “there will no longer be any scarcity in general, on condition that for a whole series of people, in a whole series of markets, there was some scarcity ... the scarcity that caused the death of individuals not only does not disappear, it must not disappear.” To valorise the belief that some will have to starve for the benefit of others, a radical distinction between “peoples” and “populations” must be introduced. For Foucault the population includes those members of the community who adhere to the new rationality of market regulation, even promoting it as a means to attain greater security. The people, on the other hand, are those who “disrupt the system” and “throw themselves on the [food] supplies.” They reject the new liberal order, and because of this they are perceived as political outcasts and delinquents, “threats, either external or internal, to the population.”

According to Foucault, in a liberal biopolitical system “killing or the imperative to kill is acceptable only if it results not in a victory over political adversaries, but in the elimination of the biological threat to and improvement of the species or race.” Put differently, famine is permissible if it provokes a desirable social and economic change. Those who stand in the way of progress, or refuse to be assimilated, are deemed to be worthless degenerates—in a word, human encumbrances—thwarting the civilising currents of capitalist modernity.

It should be evident that when Foucault describes “killing or the imperative to kill” he does not mean simply murder as such but “every form of indirect murder: the fact of exposing someone to death, increasing the risk of death for some people, or quite simply, political death, expulsion, rejection, and so on.” Tania Murray Li fruitfully employs Foucault’s unique genealogy of state power to analyse the violence
of development practices aimed at encouraging purer morals and better habits among supposedly backward peoples. Significantly, Li concludes that the colonial will to improve was “difficult to reconcile with high mortality, although not, it seems, impossible.” Studies by Eric Stokes and Mike Davis similarly detail how millions of famine deaths were the outcome of normative economic theories designed to “advance” native capacities rather than any programme of direct killing. A comparable understanding of political violence can also be found in Maybury-Lewis’s assessment of colonial rule, which concludes that “widespread dying resulted not so much from deliberate killing but from the fatal circumstances imposed by imperialists on the conquered.” These studies speak volumes about the ways in which colonial regimes can undermine indigenous food systems through, for instance, the commercialisation of agrarian practices, the erosion of customary entitlements, the denial of political voice, or the failure to implement “anti-scarcity” programmes in times of crisis. Even the supposedly higher goal of stimulating socioeconomic reforms can cause or exacerbate human suffering by suppressing alternative conceptions of development or by crushing more progressive humanitarian impulses. Ensuing famines may not be the result of any direct killing (in fact, very few famines are “genocidal” in this sense), but it does not follow that food crises are “natural” occurrences outside the realm of human affairs.

What is being emphasised here is the shifting context of government regulation: modern famines are distinguishable from previous subsistence crises insofar as they take place within new systems of production, modalities of representation, and regimes of power. “Modernity may have promised that hunger would be vanished,” writes James Vernon, “but its dogged persistence produced a constant reinvention of the problem.” In Ireland this sense of “reinventing” the problem of famine is played out in different theatres of political conduct. These include contestations over (a) discursive authority, particularly the ability to define populations as savage, backward, and degenerate; (b) the development of institutional power, including the potential to control and regulate social behaviour; and finally (c) the mobilisation of politico-legal action, which is necessary to regulate or compel subject populations. As we shall see, the famine situation contributed to the extension of state
power (augmenting an earlier shift from local to centralised methods of control), which together with the expansion of biopolitical norms, enabled the colonial state to target the Irish social body under the pretext of reform.

Outline of the Book

Chapter 1 examines Ireland’s colonial status. By all accounts, Irish poverty was acute by the mid-nineteenth century, and I make the case that the colonial experience is central—not incidental—to this situation. In particular, I want to show how the making and taking of space—politically, socially, and economically—is directly related to Irish vulnerability, especially the capacity of peasants and smallholders to cope with what Mokyr calls “exogenous shocks.” The larger argument is that there is a radical shift in colonial governance toward biopolitics and more meticulous methods of superintending Irish life, land, and resources.

Chapter 2 offers a critical account of how contemporaries responded to pre-Famine Irish life and how a discursive space opened up between “the satiated” and “the emaciated.” The chapter is intended as an analysis of popular geopolitics, one that takes seriously Amartya Sen’s contention that “the sense of difference between ruler and ruled—between ‘us’ and ‘them’—is a crucial feature of famines.” I explore how empathy can be rhetorically disabled by focusing on what might be called “instrumental knowledges” about Ireland and the Irish, as developed in political pamphlets, contemporary travel accounts, and reports commissioned by the British government. Rather than treat these accounts as merely “descriptive,” I show how they contribute to making Irish life visible so that it might be more governable. Similar to modern scientific knowledge, these accounts attempt to “bring distant objects close to hand, rendering these transported objects manipulable and predictable.” The resulting distinctions—between those who represent and those who are considered incapable of representing themselves—shaped the terms for dealing with the Irish poor.

Chapter 3 discusses the drafting and implementation of an Irish Poor Law in 1838, four years after the overhaul of the English Poor Law.
Law and just seven years prior to the first appearance of *Phytophthora infestans*. The Poor Law was a new social experiment meant to better manage and regulate pauperism; however, the Irish system differed in crucial respects from its English counterpart—a divergence that was valorised by appealing to anthropological accounts of Irish difference (as discussed in chapter 2). I then explore how the government responded to the appearance of blight in Ireland, focusing on the plethora of institutional spaces—and legislative initiatives—designed to address the problem of Irish hunger. A major part of this response involved the co-opting of the Poor Law as a famine relief strategy, a decision that had very severe consequences for the poorest and most vulnerable sections of Irish society. I argue that the government’s relief operations enabled the state to virtually monopolise the means of subsistence, thus assuming control over a radically depotentiated form of life. In other words, the administration of relief slowly merged with the biopolitical regulation of what Agamben terms “bare life.”

The emphasis on corrective regulation is quite deliberate; in chapter 4 I show how temporary aid structures were bound up with long-term goals aimed at radically restructuring Irish society. The desire to break the pattern of small, subsistence-based landholdings and cultivate a tripartite division of labour among landlords, capitalist tenant farmers, and landless wage labourers (as had happened in England) was well expressed and theorised prior to the arrival of the potato blight. Influenced by these views on agrarian transition, the Irish Famine was increasingly interpreted as a productive crisis, an occasion when “great organic changes”—as the author of the Irish Poor Law termed them—could be effected with conceivably less resistance from Irish smallholders hoping to hold on to their social positions. This chapter shows how relief operations facilitated depopulation and dispossession and how “formerly unacceptable means and sacrifices were justified by the overriding importance of the ultimate goal”: the long-term modernisation of Irish society.

Chapter 5 examines Thomas Carlyle’s journeys in Ireland. Carlyle’s opinions on Ireland and the Irish are significant for a number of reasons. First, the timing of his visits is immediately striking. Carlyle travelled to Ireland first in 1846 and then again in 1849. These dates profile the beginning and the deadly culmination of the Great Irish Famine,
and Carlyle’s response to these different “faminescapes” is important. The chapter also considers Carlyle’s economic thinking. Although known as a vocal critic of laissez-faire, Carlyle left Ireland extolling the virtues of the market as a disciplinary mechanism capable of restoring moral order. This shift in Carlyle’s economic thinking parallels his propensity to qualify human value through environmental and racial readings of the Famine. Finally, I consider Carlyle’s relationship with the well-known nationalist Charles Gavan Duffy, who accompanied him on both of his Irish tours. Duffy published his own account of their sojourn, and it offers a vivid counterpoint to Carlyle’s perspective. A close reading of their journey— and subsequent quarrels— helps us understand how particular political rationalities are forged at the “contact zone” of two cultures. Such calculations take us into the domain of biopower and capitalist political economy, the two most powerful forces directing the government’s response to the Irish Famine.95

The final chapter revisits some of the main arguments of the book by exploring the contradictions between the ideology of improvement and the huge and lasting devastation caused by the Great Famine. Recent historiography has been mired in contentious debate over the relative culpability of the British government. Most scholars of the Famine reject the extreme nationalist charge of genocide, but beyond that there is little consensus. I argue for a more nuanced understanding of “famineogenic behaviour”— behaviour that aids and abets famine— that draws distinctions between the effects of political indifference (a policy of “letting die”) and reckless conduct (including utopian plans to radically reconstitute Irish society), whilst acknowledging that both kinds of behaviour can produce extraordinary levels of violence. The context of causality is therefore important, not only in terms of redefining the discussion of culpability but also in terms of taking seriously the alternatives to the British government’s famine policies.96 The fact that famine and malnutrition continue to haunt a depressingly large portion of humanity illustrates how far we are from understanding the legacy of the nineteenth century and how important it is to explain the forces that shape vulnerability and determine overall famine mortality. This book is an effort to open up this indispensable enquiry.
Chapter One

Fatal Circumstances

Colonialism and the Origins of Vulnerability to Famine

Strange it is that this poor hungry Ireland, in which so many actually die of hunger every year, and in whose bills of mortality and hospital books “starvation” is as regular a heading as any other cause of death;—strange it is I say, that this country should, above all things, be destined to feed so many strangers on her soil.

—J. G. Kohl, Ireland, Scotland, and England

The mass of the people struggle against the same poverty, flounder about making the same gestures and with their shrunken bellies outline what has been called the geography of hunger.

—Frantz Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth

Colonial Encounters

Most accounts of the Great Famine begin their analysis in 1845—coinciding with the appearance of potato blight—and among the many books now available, very few choose to situate the story of hunger within an historical geography of colonisation and population management.1 In 1975 Peter Gibbon declared “The occasion for all this [suffering] is well known—successive failures of the potato crop, the staple diet of half the population. Less well known are the circumstances in which this situation arose, and their relation to British
colonialism.” Precisely twenty years later, marking the sesquicentennial commemoration of the blight, Kevin Whelan could still justifiably assert that the “colonial context . . . [is] too often ignored in our recent analyses of nineteenth-century Irish life.”

While this outline is accurate enough, more recent publications have begun to question and overturn this historiographical tradition by exploring, for example, the connections between Irish and Indian famines and by interrogating the ideological assumptions shaping the British administrative system in the nineteenth century. Also noteworthy is the fact that scholars working on other colonial famines have observed strong connections with Ireland in the 1840s. By and large, however, this research remains quite marginal to the mainstream historiography of the Irish Famine, a fact that partly reflects the fractious and ongoing debate regarding the applicability of colonial models to Irish history more generally.

It is odd, then, that the most popular account of the Famine and possibly the most widely selling Irish history book of all time, Cecil Woodham-Smith’s *The Great Hunger*, frames the Great Famine in relation to Ireland’s political subjugation. Arguably, it is precisely this focus that some scholars find so jarring. For instance, Liam Kennedy critiques the Irish mythology of “incomparable oppression” resulting from an unhealthy reliance on a small, but quite vocal, coterie of nationalist writers. Published in 1962, Woodham-Smith’s *The Great Hunger* is usually seen as emblematic of this “mythological” tradition. Indeed, in contradiction to the facts, D.G. Boyce goes so far as to suggest that “writers as diverse as Cecil Woodham Smith and the IRA leader, Ernie O’Malley, shared a common view of the Famine as a kind of genocide.”

Until quite recently historical accounts loosely following Woodham-Smith’s interpretation were characteristically derided as “emotive,” a designation that disregards certain historical interpretations whilst promoting other, presumably more “objective,” readings.

There are no doubt important exceptions to this trend. I have already mentioned the beginnings of comparative research on “colonial famines,” to which I should now add the diverse writings associated with “The Field Day Company,” which are on the whole exceptionally attentive to the implications of colonisation. Beyond this diverse group
of scholars, historians Peter Gray, Christine Kinealy, and Kerby Miller have all published research that explores—sometimes directly, though more often implicitly—the relationship between colonialism and the Irish Famine. Kinealy’s *A Death-Dealing Famine*, for example, writes the history of the 1840s back into the Irish experience of “dispossession and disunity.”10 Significantly, none of these accounts has prompted anything like the ridicule heaped upon Woodham-Smith.11 While recent research has come closer to agreeing with many of Woodham-Smith’s original conclusions, a great deal of theoretical and substantive investigation remains to be done.12 *The Great Hunger* was published just before the wave of decolonisation in the non-European world and the advent of postcolonial studies as a vibrant research field in its own right.13 Meanwhile, in Ireland the sesquicentennial commemorations have come and gone, but we are still without a substantial monograph addressing the Irish Famine as a colonial experience.

This chapter does not—and cannot—attempt to redress this fact; however, it does make the case that a historical perspective on how space is seized, occupied, and reconstituted is necessary for understanding the genesis and progression of the Great Famine. As Cameroonian political scientist Achille Mbembe reminds us, colonisation is an innately spatial process, involving the violent transformation of indigenous polities and social structures:

*Colonial occupation* itself was a matter of seizing, delimiting, and asserting control over a physical geographical area—of writing on the ground a new set of social and spatial relations. The writing of new spatial relations (territorialization) was, ultimately, tantamount to the production of boundaries and hierarchies, zones and enclaves; the subversion of existing property arrangements; the classification of people according to different categories; resource extraction; and, finally, the manufacturing of a large reservoir of cultural imaginaries.14

The colonial rewriting of spatial relations, as described by Mbembe, can be read productively alongside recent work in critical famine theory, which urges scholars to look beyond the “end game” of famine (that
is, mass mortality) to focus instead on the recasting of agrarian relations in ways that undermine rural livelihoods or facilitate expropriation. Considering famine as a process, not an event, puts greater emphasis on the transformations taking place in rural social relations—changes that must ultimately affect the viability of certain ways of life and the susceptibility of particular populations to exogenous shocks. The point argued here is that colonisation is itself a formative social force with lasting implications.

It has already been suggested that the unprecedented upheaval in landownership, particularly in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, had a precipitous impact on nineteenth-century Irish life. Critics of this argument sometimes point to other instances of agrarian dispossession, particularly the enclosures in the English countryside, which concentrated land ownership and facilitated rural proletarianisation. There are clear and irrevocable distinctions between the English and Irish experiences, however. In England the position of peasant proprietors was more commonly undermined through a process of appropriation (“buying out” by landlords), whereas in Ireland the shift in control over land was accomplished through a system of expropriation involving military occupation backed by an expansionist state. The use of state power and violence as the leverage of social change suggests that more accurate comparisons might be drawn with other colonial contexts. In Indonesia, for example, “agrarian differentiation” was accomplished through “forced markets” rather than market forces: “It took intervention, by force and law, to transform land into private property that could be bought, sold, and accumulated, and to transform people into wage labourers available for hire.” Examining the agrarian question in Karamoja, Uganda, Mamdani shows how British colonialism began with the “forcible acquisition of land,” leaving local people bereft of the means of production and thrust back onto precarious pastoral modes of existence. In his account of colonial Ceylon, geographer James Duncan similarly highlights the exceptional control over labour necessary to insert (racialised) bodies into the process of surplus production and the unique role of the state in restructuring markets to encourage export-oriented agriculture. While the exercise of colonial power was never absolute—and peasants continued to re-
sist through a multitude of subversive tactics—it is hardly in doubt that agrarian relations were profoundly transformed through colonial encounters and that these changes often had negative consequences on the political and economic trajectories of colonised societies.

In the discussion that follows, therefore, I prioritise three colonial encounters in Ireland: the foundation of the Pale, the plantations and confiscations during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and the Act of Union made law in 1801. I describe these colonial encounters as iterative performances—serial “acts of union”—that attempted to make good an original claim of possession. The privileging of these encounters serves to highlight the fact that colonial rule often differed remarkably in terms of social vision and political methods. Admitting the heterodox nature of colonisation in practice should not obscure the fact that its ideological character rested on a relatively unquestioned set of core beliefs. These included the presumptions that native populations were fundamentally incapable of autonomous development (hence colonial subjects required constant remedial intervention) and that, in certain situations, violent methods may be necessary to stimulate political reform and socioeconomic development. Indeed, colonialism continually spun on a dialectic of conversion and coercion, at times preferring military pacification as an engine of modernisation, while on other occasions favouring a “milder enlightenment ethos of order, progress and rationality” as the most expedient harbinger of social change. We begin now with the scene of colonisation where these rival tensions were originally articulated.

**Colonial Law and the Pale**

Ireland’s colonial history is both long and complex. Early raids by Scandinavian Vikings brought Ireland its first settler populations since the Celts arrived in 400 BCE, but the country’s political association with England did not begin until the Norman conquests (1169–1315). Like the Vikings they succeeded, the Norman settlers preferred to seize the fertile lowlands and consolidate their power in urban centres. Their settlements were inevitably piecemeal, and in time they merged with