

# Bitter Harvest of Oppression



A. J. CARTER

THERE ARE few people who have not heard of the potato blight and famine in Ireland in the eighteenth forties, one of the few examples of the land question that is taught us in school, where, however, the Irish-English conflict inevitably overshadows the more important landlord-tenant conflict. There is little in common between the platitudes of the schoolroom and the carefully documented recording and interpretation of events which Mrs. Woodham-Smith gives us in *The Great Hunger: Ireland 1845-9*\* She combines fairness with a striking sympathy for the sufferings of the Irish people, and has arranged the book with such skill that one's attention is constantly engaged in spite of the tremendous bulk of detail. One is led gently along a forest path, surrounded by a profusion of trees and foliage but always maintaining just enough momentum to make the walk a pleasant and not a boring one. It is rarely appreciated by laymen that one of the vital qualities in a successful writer of books is an outstanding capacity for the organisation of his material.

Although 1845 is the date that sticks in the mind, that year marked only the beginning and not the most intense part of "the great hunger." It was in 1845 that blight of the potato first appeared in Ireland and much of the potato crop was lost, but far more serious was the total failure of the crop in 1846. It was this total failure, coming on top of the partial failure of 1845 and reducing the already precarious standard of living, which produced famine and extreme poverty. One effect of this was that little seed was planted for the following year, so that although 1847 was an excellent year for the potato, the crop was not large enough to check the course of the famine. The following year, 1848, was again a year of total failure of the crop and starvation for the Irish people. Over this period the hardships of hunger and poverty were accompanied by disease in the form (or rather the two forms) of fever, and this fever was not confined to Ireland but in the mass emigrations was carried across the sea to Britain and more particularly to Canada and the United States, where quarantine arrangements were overwhelmed and shocking and tragic epidemics occurred. The author ends her account with the visit of Queen Victoria to Ireland in 1849 but as she trenchantly comments, "The famine was never 'over' . . . The poverty of the Irish people continued, dependence on the potato continued, failures of the potato, to a greater or lesser extent continued, and hunger continued."

\*Cecil Woodham-Smith, Hamish Hamilton, London, 1962.

Even before the outbreak of famine in 1845 the majority of the population of Ireland lived in a state of degradation. According to the 1841 census nearly half the rural population lived in single-roomed windowless mud cabins. There were some for whom even one of these would have been a luxury—they lived in roofed ditches or holes in banks or bogs. In 1843 the British government set up a royal commission to inquire into the system of occupation of land in Ireland and it concluded that the principal cause of this Irish misery was the bad relationship between landlords and tenants. Ireland was a country conquered by England, and the land of Ireland was largely in the ownership of English landlords, most of whom lived outside Ireland and rarely visited it. Hatred of landlords became identified with hatred of the English and the two were utterly confused. At the time the famine began the political agitation was for home rule for Ireland, a repeal of the Act of Union of 1801 by which the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland was created, and Irish parliamentary representatives sat at Westminster.

It was not until 1847, when the movement for repeal was withering, that Fintan Lalor re-activated the young revolutionaries of Ireland by proclaiming that the big issue facing the country was that of the land not that of repeal. But even Lalor's concern was that the owners of the Irish soil should be Irish. It seemed to occur to no one at the time, as it occurred to few since, that the underlying situation would have been only one degree less harsh if the landlords had been Irish not English. Some might even have shown more concern, but the facts of the system of land tenure itself would not have been altered. One result of there being absentee landlords was that estates were left in the hands of agents or were leased on long leases to "middlemen" who divided the land and sublet it. The agents and middlemen were not noticeably more lenient to the tenants for being Irish.

The small size of holdings became one of the characteristics of the land of Ireland, and this may have been associated with increasing reliance on the potato, which could be profitably grown in a small area. Mrs. Woodham-Smith tells us that 93 per cent of Irish farms were fewer than 30 acres and that some families lived off one acre or even less. There was almost no regular agricultural or other employment and the Irish labourer had little alternative but to seek a plot of land on which to grow his own crop. As the population increased, shortage of avail-

able land led to continual subdivision and so intensified dependence on the potato. In addition, there were two particularly evil features of the Irish system of land tenure which together made the tenant's position a hopeless one. The first was that any improvements made by a tenant reverted to the landlord, so there was almost no incentive to carry out improvement. (In Ulster there was a system of compensation for improvements known as "tenant right," and the royal commission found that the higher prosperity of Ulster compared with the rest of Ireland was due to tenant right). The second was that the majority of tenants were tenants at will—that is, they could be evicted by the landlord whenever he chose, and ejection, in the words of a member of parliament, was "tantamount to a sentence of death by slow torture." Even where leases did exist, tenants usually lost their protection. Without capital, and faced with the need to build a shack in which to live, a new tenant was frequently obliged to accept the landlord's offer to leave the rent in arrear until after the first harvest—a device known as the "hanging gale"—and once rent was owing the security of lease vanished. It is not surprising to read that there were good landlords in Ireland, people who not only ran their estates well but erected farm buildings, earned the trust of their tenants, and acted humanely during the famine, but the effect of the system under which landlords could be ruthless as of right was to crush the Irish people.

It is often assumed that nothing at all was done by England for Ireland during the "great hunger." It would be more correct to say that in the early years a great deal was done, or attempted, although much of it was inadequate and ineffective. It is perhaps surprising that support on such a substantial scale was acceptable at that time, but there was an elaborate relief organization, extensive provision of public works to give employment, and between 1845 and mid-1847 England advanced eight million pounds. The government of an independent Ireland could scarcely have done more, if as much. These measures were superintended by a Treasury mandarin named Trevelyan (later Sir Charles Trevelyan, K.C.B., famous for his work in reorganising the civil service). Trevelyan shared the contemporary so-called *laissez-faire* thinking, and this conditioned the British government's attitude to the whole programme: for example, not too much (mainly Indian corn) could be made available by the government because the depression of prices would hinder supply by private merchants. This strait-laced policy ignored the fact that the Irish could not afford to buy food, and it was for this reason that even the repeal of the corn laws—a noble step forward in itself—was of small benefit to the Irish. There may be nothing wrong with a broad policy of *laissez-faire*, but there is everything wrong with removing barriers to trade and the operation of the free market while leaving untouched a greater barrier, that to production itself.

By mid-1847 the English were sick of helping Ireland and decided that Ireland should deal with its own mis-

fortunes, although by that time ruin had spread even to the landlords and not much could be done. Ireland was abandoned to the "operation of natural causes."

One of the reasons why the English became fed up with giving relief to the Irish, was what they considered to be the defects of the Irish temperament: not only were the Irish ungrateful for the help given but they seemed utterly unable to help themselves. I have rather more sympathy with the frustration of the English than Mrs. Woodham-Smith (except when our own survival is at stake we hate things to be long drawn out), but the fact is that the oppressions of centuries do create a sluggishness which destroys the natural adaptability of men. It might be supposed that a starving people, dependent on the potato as they were and without skill at growing much else, would nevertheless have found some way of feeding themselves, but their environment had deprived them not only of the ability to experiment but also of the will to do so. Moreover, the fundamental economic relationship in that environment did not change with the onset of famine. It is well-known that while the Irish peasants starved and suffered the most appalling deprivations, grain by the shipload was being sent out of Ireland in payment of rent. Perhaps this grain alone could not have fed the entire Irish people, but it would have certainly made a powerful difference to the situation.

Why did the Irish not fish? There are a number of reasons given by Mrs. Woodham-Smith, chief of which is that there were no suitable boats, but these reasons seem inadequate in themselves. When the alternative is starvation, one would think that some means would be found to procure or build the right boats. The answer must lie in rigidity, the setting hard as it were of what had always been done because the prospect of doing anything else, of hoping for any change or improvement, had long ago been given up. Such a loss of adaptability, the result of a bad system of land tenure, must have the same effect on peoples, and for that matter civilizations, as it had on the creatures over which man became master.

The despair induced in the Irish over the centuries and intensified by famine led to resignation not only at home but also abroad. Just as in Ireland itself, although filled with British troops in anticipation of rebellion, efforts at revolution were derisory, so in Britain and North America the Irish put up with pitiful conditions which few other immigrants would tolerate. Indeed, one cannot help being struck by some parallels between the mass Irish emigrations of that time and the recent coloured immigration into Britain. There was considerable antipathy to the influx of immigrants who were poor, sometimes exploited, and usually lived in squalid overcrowded houses, often in cellars. In addition (unlike today's immigrants) they were diseased, a few cases of fever spreading rapidly in the overcrowded and insanitary ships in which the voyage was made.

A review of *The Great Hunger* would not be complete without some mention of the Society of Friends, to whom Mrs. Woodham-Smith has constantly to refer. Not only

did they do a great deal, but what they did was invariably sensible, even though it sometimes failed. They were the first to run soup kitchens, one of the most effective relief measures later adopted by the British Government. They tried to encourage fishing, though this was regrettably not very successful. They distributed the government's surplus of turnip and green crop seed after the government had stopped its paltry efforts because seed merchants complained that the market was spoilt, and thereafter regarded the distribution of seed as the best method of relief. When in June 1849, after over two and a half years, the Society of Friends ceased its relief work, telling the government that "the Government alone could raise the funds and carry out the measures necessary in many districts to save the lives of the people," they also concluded that "... the condition of our country has not improved in spite of the great exertions made by charitable bodies" and that improvement could come about only with a reform of the land system, by legislation not by philanthropy. It is a conclusion as pertinent today as it was then, but still ignored in most of the developing world, where foreign aid—philanthropy—is still preferred to the radical adjustment of land reform.

## CITY COLUMN

Michael D. K. Turner



AMONGST the literature I received last month was the Directors' Report and Statement of Accounts of The Montevideo Gas and Dry Dock Company Limited. It is an interesting and readable account of a deplorable situation, and if anyone should wonder what will be the result of the economic policies now being pursued in the UK, then he should look at the position in Uruguay today.

At the end of the Report a little gem lies buried. It is a quotation from one of my own favourite books, Motley's *Rise of the Dutch Republic*, in which William the Silent pronounces his austere policy: "It is not necessary to hope in order to endeavour, nor to succeed in order to persevere."

I enjoyed reading Professor John Jewkes in the *Sunday Telegraph*, November 17, giving his personal opinion that "there is no such thing as economic miracles." Also Mr. P. M. Oppenheimer, in the *National Westminster Bank Review* for November, exploding the argument for import restrictions.

The text of Dr. Holtrop's talk on Central Banking and Economic Integration, delivered in Stockholm in May this year, is now being circulated by the Per Jacobsson Foundation. What is fascinating in this little pamphlet is the commentary given by Lord Cromer, former Governor

of the Bank of England, who also spoke his mind freely on this occasion. He pointed out that the UK has consistently relied on her invisible trade balance, having in only five years since 1796 achieved a trade surplus. He points out the folly of exchange control, particularly when in 1967 some \$250 million of privately-owned capital seems to have been diverted to the official reserves, where it was dissipated in official market support. Lord Cromer continues, "Let us not forget that from one control grows the next control; discrimination leads to further discrimination, and mistrust feeds on mistrust."

M. Pierre-Paul Schweitzer, Managing Director of the International Monetary Fund, has said: "I have viewed with the utmost disquiet the recent upsurge of protectionist pressures. The advocates of protectionism seek a sectional interest, not a national one. The economic distortions produced by such policies penalize the community as a whole. A nation that shuts out the goods of other countries, moreover, reduces their ability, and also their inclination, to buy from it in turn. Once this sort of process is initiated, retaliatory measures are likely to proliferate to the detriment of all countries."

★

Addresses:

The Registrar, Lonrho Ltd., Cheapside House, Cheapside, London, E.C.2.

The Registrar, The Montevideo Gas and Dry Dock Company Ltd., 321 Dashwood House, Old Broad Street, London, E.C.2.

## The Parable of Omar Ibn Tawari

BY "YNAD"

IN THE 1830s when steamships came into use, sites for fuelling stations acquired value in the same way as do similar sites for aircraft today. The government of Bombay, seeking a coaling station for steamers from the Cape, considered the island of Socotra suitable for this purpose. It formed part of the domain of Omar ibn Tawari, petty sultan of the Mahra tribe, who resided at Qishn on the coast of the Arabian mainland.

An Arabic-speaking naval officer, sent to investigate, reported that in the absence of the sultan he had found two young chiefs evidently favourable to ceding the island. The Governor, no doubt regarding land as a commodity, like any other, to be bought and sold, and incapable of being used unless owned, sent back the officer with authority to bargain up to £2,000 in order to complete the transaction. It did not occur to the Governor that a poor Arab might refuse such a fortune, so he prepared a ship with troops to sail direct to Socotra to take over the goods.

The officer found the sultan an old man, blind and deformed, but he was impressed by the Arab's courtesy, dignity and intelligence. After listening attentively to the advantages he would gain by selling this poor grazing land,