

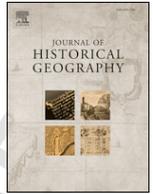


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George Cornwall Lewis, Irish character and the Irish poor law debate, 1833–1836

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ABSTRACT

George Cornwall Lewis was a prominent political and literary figure in the mid nineteenth century, serving as both chancellor of the exchequer and home secretary under Palmerston. He had a wide range of interests and wrote on many topics from philosophy to philology and forms of government to astronomy. This article focuses on his views of what was called 'the Irish character' in the period 1833–1836, alongside the part which he believed a poor law could play in the reform of both the individual Irish peasant and the wider economy of Ireland. Lewis was an assistant commissioner on the royal commission which examined poverty in Ireland and was responsible for examining Irish migration to England and Scotland. He later wrote a confidential report to Thomas Spring Rice strongly criticising the royal commission's refusal to recommend a poor law for Ireland and also published a book in which he discussed what he saw as the main causes of, and solutions to, Irish poverty. Lewis's public and private writings provide a rich source of theory and philosophy surrounding the character of the Irish peasantry, its capacity to develop, and the central role of an Irish poor law in this process.

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George Cornwall Lewis was born in London on 21 April 1806, the eldest of two sons of Thomas Frankland Lewis and Harriet Cornwall. He later attended Eton and Christ Church, Oxford obtaining a first in classics and a second in mathematics in 1828 and an MA in 1831. In 1833 he was appointed as an assistant commissioner to the Royal Commission for Inquiring into the Condition of the Poorer Classes in Ireland with the specific task of inquiring into the Irish immigrants who had travelled to Britain in search of work. Before completing his report he was asked to serve on another commission which examined the religious makeup of Ireland and in 1836 published a book from his experiences on both these inquiries.¹ In the same year he travelled with his friend John Austin to Malta to lead an inquiry into the governance of the island, and in January 1839 he took his father's seat on the permanent poor law commission (hindering its secretary Edwin Chadwick's own advancement), serving as chairman until its dissolution in 1847.² Lewis later became editor of the *Edinburgh Review*, served on numerous further commissions, and continued to publish works on a wide range of political and literary topics.³ He served as chancellor of the exchequer between 1855 and

1858; home secretary between 1859 and 1861; and secretary of state for war, from 1861 until his death in 1863.⁴ Although some aspects of Lewis's writings have been closely examined in the past, his views on what he and his contemporaries called 'the Irish character' and the influence of the poor law on it have not.⁵

This article will examine George Cornwall Lewis's views, as expressed in the period 1833–1836, on how the people and economy of Ireland could be reconfigured and transformed through the introduction of the recently restructured English poor law. The approach taken will be to use the three primary sources analysed- *Appendix G* to the royal commission's third report, Lewis's book *On Local Disturbances* and his *Remarks* on the royal commission's recommendations, alongside private correspondence to identify Lewis's views on the Irish character, and analyse how those shaped his ideas on political

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¹ *Poor Inquiry (Ireland). Appendix G. Report on the State of the Irish Poor in Great Britain*, Parliamentary Papers [hereafter P.P.] 1836, 40; *State of Religious and other Public Instruction in Ireland*, P.P. 1835, 45, 46, 47; G. Cornwall Lewis, *On Local Disturbances; and on the Irish Church Question*, London, 1836.

² S.E. Finer, *The Life and Times of Sir Edwin Chadwick*, London, 1952, 146.

³ G. Cornwall Lewis, *Remarks on the Use and Abuse of Some Political Terms*, London, 1832; G. Cornwall Lewis, *Essay on the Origin and Formation of the Romance Languages*, Oxford, 1835; G. Cornwall Lewis, *An Essay on the Influence of Authority in Matters of Opinion*, London, 1849; and G. Cornwall Lewis, *Dialogue on the Best Form of Government*, London, 1863.

⁴ To date there has only been one biography of Lewis, see R.W.D. Fenn, *The Life and Times of Sir George Cornwall Lewis, Bart. A Radnorshire Gentleman*, Almeley, 2005. See also J.B. Sinclair and R.W.D. Fenn, 'Radnorshire to her most distinguished son': Sir George Cornwall Lewis 1806–1863, *Transactions of the Radnorshire Society* 68 (1998) 105–138; and R.H. Hutton (Ed.), *Biographical Studies by the Late Walter Bagehot*, London, 1907, 223–266.

⁵ K.E. Bock, History and a science of man: an appreciation of George Cornwall Lewis, *Journal of the History of Ideas* 12 (1951) 599–608; K.C. Wheare, Sir George Cornwall Lewis as a political scientist, *Political Studies* 20 (1972) 407–420; S.H. Palmer, Appreciation, Sir George Cornwall Lewis, a different kind of Englishman, *Eire-Ireland* XVI (1981) 118–133; R. Posner, Sir George Cornwall Lewis: statesman and 'new philologist', *Historiographia Linguistica* 17 (1990) 339–356; R. Brown, Artificial experiments on society: Comte, G.C. Lewis and Mill, *Journal of Historical Sociology* 10 (1997) 74–97; and D.A. Smith, The birth of 'concurrent endowment': George Cornwall Lewis, the London Review and Irish-Church debate, 1835–6, *The English Historical Review* 114 (1999) 658–663.

economy and his policy prescriptions for Ireland. Lewis's interpretation of the Irish character was central to his thinking, and in particular to his profound disagreement with the royal commission's refusal to recommend a poor law for Ireland in March 1836. Thus the purpose of this article is to tease out and place in context the significance of Lewis's arguments in favour of an Irish poor law. Lewis's views on the Irish character are worthy of focussed attention given that his *Remarks*, alongside three official reports by George Nicholls, ultimately led to the establishment of an Irish poor law in 1838. Lewis was an important figure in the mid nineteenth century, although now somewhat eclipsed by Chadwick, and his subsequent role in administering the English poor law and his later distinguished political career mean his writings on Ireland between 1833 and 1836 deserve closer examination. The article is structured around Lewis's three primary contributions on Ireland interspersed with his contemporary private correspondence. These works will be considered in chronological order, beginning in December 1833 and ending in September 1836. First, however, it is necessary to outline the nineteenth-century debate on the character of the Irish.

'Civilising' Ireland

Discussions of the Irish character tended to focus on the behaviours and qualities of the Catholic Irish peasantry and labouring classes. Robert Romani has noted that the dominant view of their character expressed by most nineteenth-century British observers emphasised its 'warm-heartedness, inquisitiveness, and social disposition; whereas, on the dark side, its indolence, proneness to fight and riot, inclination to lawlessness, and lack of forward thinking were commonly mentioned'.⁶ Since identity must be understood relationally, and thus 'Self' is always constructed in relation to its 'Other', specific aspects of British and Irish character were often compared. For example, where 'the Celt was child-like, the Anglo-Saxon was mature; instead of emotional instability, he could boast of self-control; he was energetic not lazy, rational not superstitious, civilised not primitive, clean not dirty, ready to forgive not vengeful, and prepared to live under the rule of law'.⁷ Joep Leerssen has noted that the stereotypical British-Irish opposition was often 'genderized in that the Irish character is seen as fundamentally feminine, as opposed to the masculine qualities of England. But the notion of manhood, which England predicates to itself, has more antonyms than female alone: the opposite number of a man can take the form of "beast" ... or it can take the form of "child" or "boy"', in need of instruction and guidance.⁸

There were many longstanding theories on both the causes and consequences of the apparent differences between the British and Irish character. On the one hand there were those that included viewing differences as innate, primordial and racial in nature, which helpfully removed any responsibility from the British for Ireland's economic malaise, but unhelpfully left little opportunity or prospect for improvement. On the other hand there were those that emphasised the negative impact of past misgovernment and discrimination by the

British on the development and 'civilisation' of the Irish, helpfully leaving the door open to improvement under proper and non-discriminatory conditions. Allied arguments on the reasons for differential rates of progress between the two countries were wide and varied, including the role of climate, natural resources, diet, wars, invasions and settlements, education and legal systems, religion, class and culture.⁹

These debates shaped how Ireland was governed. According to Michael de Nie, the Acts of Union in 1800 were 'widely regarded by the British press as an opportunity to remodel Ireland politically, economically, and morally.... The most commonly prescribed cure for Britannia's "sick sister" Erin was Anglicization, the transplantation of the qualities that supposedly made Britain first among nations. Simply put, Ireland needed to become less Irish and more British'.¹⁰ One feature central to the everyday lives of millions of British citizens in the nineteenth century was the poor law. In 1834 this had been extensively reformed across England and Wales for the first time in over two centuries. Under the old poor law local parishes had granted outdoor relief to a wide range of people, able and non-able bodied, old and young, virtuous and vicious, and did so in many forms, including direct money payments, provision of food and basic necessities and several forms of wage supplements. There was much variation between parishes and increasing experimentation in the decades before 1834. The reforms introduced as a response to the recommendations of the royal commission into the poor laws established large administrative unions of parishes responsible for the first time to a central authority sitting in London and attempts were made to abolish outdoor relief for the able-bodied poor.

Central to the new poor law was the principle of 'less-eligibility' and the workhouse test. Officials could not refuse to grant relief to a poor person, but they could require that the applicant enter the workhouse in order to obtain relief. Since the conditions in the workhouse were to be made deliberately less pleasant and 'less-eligible' than those obtainable by the lowest paid labourer outside the workhouse, the applicant would always choose work over relief. This was the self-acting workhouse test which ensured that only the truly destitute would apply for and in turn receive relief. Since there was no old poor law in Ireland the debate in the 1830s centred on whether the very different economic, social and political conditions in that country were suitable or not for the transfer of the 1834 English poor law. George Cornewall Lewis was a key figure in this debate and his contribution to it was driven by his views on the Irish character and belief in the applicability of the English poor law. His first contribution, however, was to study the Irish in Britain.

The character of Irish immigrants in Britain

On 2 May 1833, fifteen months after launching the Royal Commission for Inquiring into the Administration and Practical Operation of the Poor Laws in England and Wales, the chancellor of the exchequer, Viscount Althorp, announced a separate Royal Commission for Inquiring into the Condition of the Poorer Classes in Ireland. Its chairman was the Church of Ireland archbishop of Dublin, and former professor of political economy at Oriel College, Oxford, Richard

⁶ R. Romani, British views on Irish national character, 1800–1846. An intellectual history, *History of European Ideas* 23 (1997) 193.

⁷ L.P. Curtis, *Anglo-Saxons and Celts: A Study of Anti-Irish Prejudice in Victorian England*, Bridgeport, 1968, 53.

⁸ J. Leerssen, *Remembrance and Imagination: Patterns in the Historical and Literary Representation of Ireland in the Nineteenth Century*, Cork, 1996, 171. See also J. Leerssen, *Mere Irish and Fíor Ghael: Studies in the Idea of Irish Nationality, its Development and Literary Expression Prior to the Nineteenth Century*, Cork, 1996.

⁹ For a discussion of the variety of theories on character differences, see E.G. Lengel, *The Irish Through British Eyes: Perceptions of Ireland in the Famine Era*, Westport, 2002, 1–22; and R. Romani, *National Character and Public Spirit in Britain and France, 1750–1814*, Cambridge, 2002, 201–230.

¹⁰ M. de Nie, *The Eternal Paddy, Irish Identity and the British Press, 1798–1882*, Madison, 2004, 3.

Whately.¹¹ Thomas Frankland Lewis had been approached to serve on the commission but declined. However, after having quickly abandoned a career in the law his son George Cornwall Lewis was more willing to assist, and he gained the position of assistant commissioner with responsibility to examine the state of Irish immigrants in England and Scotland.¹²

After spending the first half of 1834 travelling around the towns and cities with the largest number of Irish immigrants, Lewis submitted his forty-eight page report (with a 168 page appendix detailing the evidence he had collected) on 1 December 1834, although it was not published until the final report of the royal commission was printed in March 1836. He began by laying out the directions he had received from the Home Department on 28 December 1833. He was to 'proceed to Liverpool, Manchester, and the West of Scotland, and to make particular inquiry into the state of the Irish labourers, the reasons for their emigration, the exact difference between their situation there and at home, ... together with other points of a similar nature, on which it might appear to me desirable to obtain information'.¹³

Lewis believed that his enquiries would make two main contributions to the royal commission. The first was that by examining the claim that Irish immigrants had 'exercised a pernicious influence on the English and Scotch working classes, by lowering their wages and debasing their moral character' he would ascertain whether measures should be put in place to reduce emigration.¹⁴ The second was that by examining the influence of higher wages and the Scottish and English poor laws on the Irish settled in Britain he would be able to determine the effect on the Irish character for those remaining in Ireland if these conditions were to be transferred.

Lewis noted that he could have merely presented his appendix of evidence without a personal commentary but since he had 'ascertained many facts by local inspection and oral communication' he thought it best to comment specifically on the matter of Irish migration 'where the commonly received opinions seem most at variance with well-ascertained facts'.¹⁵ The report and its appendix contained testimony from a wide range of residents throughout England and Scotland, including Catholic clergy, police, prison and poor law officials, judicial figures, business and tradesmen, doctors, manufacturers, those working in charities, Irish migrants who had prospered since settling and those involved in assisting with the transport of migrants.¹⁶ The report included both general commentaries on the topic of Irish migration by those Lewis encountered, answers to specific queries he had made and also a variety of contemporary and historical statistical information on both the demographic and economic impact of Irish migration to Britain.

Lewis found that the Irish immigrants tended to be employed in work of the 'roughest, coarsest, and most repulsive description, and requiring the least skill and practice', and that their standard of life

was 'on a par with that of the poorest of the native population, if not inferior to it'. Considering the redundancy of labour in Ireland and the low rate of wages, compared with the continual and higher demand for labour in Britain along with higher wages and the increase in steam navigation, 'nothing seems more natural than that labourers should go from places where they are not wanted and wages are low, to places where they are wanted and wages are high'. However, Lewis did note that the scale of emigration was of a 'remarkable character' and 'perhaps nearly unparalleled in the history of the world'.¹⁷ Throughout history, he argued, emigration tended to be from 'more to less civilised nations' whilst 'Irish emigration into Britain is an example of a less civilised population spreading themselves, as a kind of substratum, beneath a more civilised community; and, without excelling in any branch of industry, obtaining possession of all the lowest departments of manual labour'.¹⁸

Although the Irish arrived with great optimism of finding well paid and continuous employment, many often 'instead of finding the Eldorado which they expected' were unable to obtain work and thus fell 'into a state of extreme destitution and helpless apathy, relying only on the assistance of their friends, and the public and private charities of the English'.¹⁹ Indeed, the issue of rising numbers of unemployed Irish immigrants claiming poor relief was one of the main arguments in favour of establishing a poor law in Ireland, in order that they could be returned and looked after at the Irish rather than the English rate-payers' expense.

Lewis felt that the Irish differed 'more from the native English or Scotch in their habits with respect to domestic comforts than in any other circumstance'.²⁰ Even when the Irish did find regular and well paid employment, their lifestyle and standard of living did not rise 'in proportion to the increase in their incomes'. Instead they had a 'fixed standard of existence' and any additional income beyond this basic level was 'spent in obtaining, not comforts, or even necessities, but luxuries of immediate consumption, and productive of very short-lived gratification'.²¹ He then went further, noting that 'a considerable number of the Irish poor, who settle in Great Britain, not only *do not* improve their habits of living, but are even deteriorated in their moral condition, and are less regular in their conduct, than they had been in their own country'.²² The change from low and inconsistent wages to regular well paid work damaged the character of the Irish since it increased 'their means of indulgence, without raising their notions of comfort or respectability'. Their morality was often debased since their surplus money furnished them 'with the means of indulging various appetites, which otherwise would remain ungratified'.²³

However, only one page later Lewis observed that 'although a large part of the Irish settlers in Great Britain retain their former habits of life unaltered, and others are deteriorated by their change of abode ... there are many on whom a beneficial influence is exercised, and whose character and habits are improved'. Regular employment could, he concluded, have a positive effect in 'producing habits of steadiness, and in keeping them from the various demoralizing pursuits which idleness too often suggests'.²⁴

¹¹ George Cornwall Lewis had previously written a review of Whately's work on logic, see G. Cornwall Lewis, *An Examination of some Passages in Dr. Whately's Elements of Logic*, Oxford, 1829.

¹² Thomas Frankland Lewis had been a member of the influential Sturges Bourne Select Committee on the Poor Laws in 1817, and had served on the Commission on Irish Education 1824–1828. He was also Tory MP for Ennis in County Clare, 1826–1828, and the first chairman of the permanent poor law commission, 1834–1839.

¹³ *Poor Inquiry (Ireland)*. Appendix G, iii.

¹⁴ *Poor Inquiry (Ireland)*. Appendix G, iii.

¹⁵ *Poor Inquiry (Ireland)*. Appendix G, iii.

¹⁶ For an examination of the collection, analysis, communication and utilisation of oral evidence by the royal commission, see N. O'Ciosain, *Ireland in Official Print Culture 1800–1850: A New Reading of the Poor Inquiry*, Oxford, 2014.

¹⁷ *Poor Inquiry (Ireland)*. Appendix G, iii.

¹⁸ *Poor Inquiry (Ireland)*. Appendix G, iv.

¹⁹ *Poor Inquiry (Ireland)*. Appendix G, vi.

²⁰ *Poor Inquiry (Ireland)*. Appendix G, xi.

²¹ *Poor Inquiry (Ireland)*. Appendix G, xiii.

²² *Poor Inquiry (Ireland)*. Appendix G, xvi (emphasis in the original).

²³ *Poor Inquiry (Ireland)*. Appendix G, xviii.

²⁴ *Poor Inquiry (Ireland)*. Appendix G, xix.

Regarding the effect of the (old) poor law on the Irish in England, Lewis noted that ‘the various evils which the outdoor relief of the poor has too generally been found to produce, viz., improvidence, recklessness, and fraud, have appeared in an aggravated shape among the poor Irish population’.²⁵ The large amount of money distributed through charities had ‘likewise assisted in increasing the unthrifty and irregular habits of many of the Irish who flock to England, and doubtless have acted as an attraction to the least valuable part of the emigrants from Ireland’.²⁶ The attacks on the apparent demoralising and debasing effects of the old poor law and the dangers of dependency had of course reached their peak with the publication of the English royal commission’s report in February 1834 whilst Lewis was still undertaking his travels throughout the country.²⁷

Lewis then identified the particular character traits which he considered the Irish labourers possessed, including a ‘willingness, alacrity, and perseverance in the severest, the most irksome, and most disagreeable kinds of coarse labour’.²⁸ However, there was not ‘a similar aptitude in the Irish for work which requires skill or nicety in the execution’.²⁹ Although Lewis found that the common view among people was that the Irish had lowered rates of wages in England and Scotland he could not find any evidence to support this. He stated that it did not necessarily follow

that if the workmen had been fewer wages would have risen; the means of employment might have been contracted as well as the number of those employed, and thus wages might have been no higher. Not only, however, might wages not have been higher than they actually are, but they might perhaps have been lower, if the manufacturing districts of England and Scotland had not had at their command a large and (as compared with their wants) an unlimited supply of Irish labourers. The labourer, it must be remembered, is a necessary instrument in the production of the fund out of which he is paid. This fund can no more be produced by capital without labour, than by labour without capital.

Lewis remarked that those not ‘engaged in business, are more awake to the moral evils than to the economical benefits which have flowed from the migration of the Irish into Britain’.³⁰ However, ‘the advantage of the demand for labour in England and Scotland being amply and adequately supplied, and at a cheap rate and at very short notice’, by Irish migrants, should not be overlooked ‘simply because they are a potato-fed and a disorderly population. Their irregular habits and low standard of comfort may be regretted; but it is to be remembered that these Irish have been, and are, most efficient workmen; that they came in the hour of need, and that they afforded the chief part of the animal strength by which the great works of our manufacturing districts have been executed’.³¹

Moreover, Lewis argued, where the Irish did practice ‘moral evils’ the effect on ‘the native working classes’ was limited since the immigrants tended to ‘herd for the most part together ... so that, except

with a very low class of wanderers and others leading an unsettled life ... there is not such intercourse as can lead to permanent deterioration’. He was confident that the ‘mere example of persons living on coarser and more scanty food, and with inferior domestic conveniences, is not likely to induce others to lower their scale of existence’.³²

Lewis concluded his report by stating that even if a poor law was introduced in Ireland, large scale emigration would continue. He gave the example of the Welsh who sought work in England during harvest time even though poor laws existed in Wales. He did concede that mendicants would have less incentive to travel if they were provided for at home, although in England there did exist ‘a large body of native vagrants, who prefer a life of itinerant mendicancy to the receipt of parochial relief’.³³

Whilst completing his travels around England and Scotland, Lewis continued to write to friends and family and on occasion discussed his views of Irish immigrants. Shortly after beginning his inquiries in January 1834 Lewis wrote to his friend Edward Ernest Villiers from Liverpool and informed him that he had asked a dispensary doctor whether there were any differences in the shape of Irish skulls and was told that ‘on the whole their foreheads were shallower & more receding than those of the Welsh or English. He said that there was something peculiar in the form of the genuine Irish skull, but I could not discover from him in what the peculiarity consists’. Lewis then remarked, connecting phrenology and racial classification, ‘this certainly confirms your suspicion that the native Irish are an inferior variety of the Caucasian race’.³⁴ Clearly, at this point Lewis felt that race played a role in producing specific Irish character traits, and thus that in some sense that these were ‘natural’ and fixed. As will be shown, however, further investigation led Lewis to change his opinion on the basis of Irish character with important implications for his view of the introduction of an Irish poor law.

Lewis’s work had been as much an investigation of English opinions as of Irish character.

A few weeks later Lewis wrote to his father from Manchester.³⁵ He discussed English views of the Irish noting that ‘If they are like the Jews a *separate*, they are also like the Jews a *rejected* caste; they are emphatically in this country what Tacitus says of the Jews among the Romans, “despectissima pars sevientium,” the most degraded of the working population. The Irish do not associate with the English, not because they dislike the English, but because the English dislike them.... All the reluctance is on *our*, not *their* part’. Lewis however felt that if the Irish were to ‘become assimilated in habits of order, and cleanliness, and decency to the English, they would not be more distinguishable from them than the English Catholics are now’.³⁶ It is

²⁵ *Poor Inquiry (Ireland). Appendix G, xxxviii.*

²⁶ *Poor Inquiry (Ireland). Appendix G, xlvi.*

²⁷ George Cornewall Lewis to Edward Ernest Villiers, 19 January 1834, Harpton Court Collection, National Library of Wales [hereafter NLW], C/2755. For a discussion of how the Irish were depicted in British caricature during the nineteenth century, see L.P. Curtis, *Apes and Angels: The Irishman in Victorian Caricature*, London, 1971. For examinations of the impact of phrenology in the nineteenth century, see D. de Giustino, *Conquest of Mind, Phrenology and Victorian Social Thought*, London, 1975; and J. Van Wyhe, *Phrenology and the Origins of Victorian Scientific Naturalism*, Aldershot, 2004.

²⁸ *Poor Inquiry (Ireland). Appendix G, xxx.*

²⁹ *Poor Inquiry (Ireland). Appendix G, xxxi.*

³⁰ *Poor Inquiry (Ireland). Appendix G, xxxvii.* For a discussion of migration to Britain in the decades before the introduction of the poor law, see B.M. Kerr, Irish seasonal migration to Great Britain, 1800–38, *Irish Historical Studies* 3 (1943) 365–380.

³¹ *Poor Inquiry (Ireland). Appendix G, xxxvii.* For a discussion of migration to Britain in the decades before the introduction of the poor law, see B.M. Kerr, Irish seasonal migration to Great Britain, 1800–38, *Irish Historical Studies* 3 (1943) 365–380.

³² *Poor Inquiry (Ireland). Appendix G, xxxviii.*

³³ *Poor Inquiry (Ireland). Appendix G, xlvi.*

³⁴ George Cornewall Lewis to Edward Ernest Villiers, 19 January 1834, Harpton Court Collection, National Library of Wales [hereafter NLW], C/2755. For a discussion of how the Irish were depicted in British caricature during the nineteenth century, see L.P. Curtis, *Apes and Angels: The Irishman in Victorian Caricature*, London, 1971. For examinations of the impact of phrenology in the nineteenth century, see D. de Giustino, *Conquest of Mind, Phrenology and Victorian Social Thought*, London, 1975; and J. Van Wyhe, *Phrenology and the Origins of Victorian Scientific Naturalism*, Aldershot, 2004.

³⁵ For a discussion of James Phillips Kay and his (much harsher than Lewis’s) views of the Irish in Manchester in 1832, see M. Poovey, *Making a Social Body: British Cultural Formation, 1830–1864*, Chicago, 1995, 55–72.

³⁶ George Cornewall Lewis to Thomas Frankland Lewis, 2 February 1834, G. Frankland Lewis (Ed.), *Letters of the Right Hon. Sir George Cornewall Lewis, Bart., to Various Friends, Edited by his Brother, Sir Gilbert Frankland Lewis*, London, 1870, 29, 30.

clear that Lewis had encountered many conflicting views of the Irish during his time travelling around Britain and these would come to strongly influence his assessment of the root causes of flaws in the Irish character and its potential for improvement.

Lewis's prescriptions for Irish development

As previously noted, Lewis had been appointed to another inquiry whilst completing his work on the Irish immigrants in Britain. This was the royal commission which examined the State of Religious and other Public Instruction in Ireland. As a result of his experiences on both inquiries, Lewis published a book in early 1836 entitled *On Local Disturbances in Ireland and on the Irish Church Question*, in which he condemned the existing connection between church and state, proposed state provision for the Catholic clergy and argued for the establishment of an efficient workhouse system (contrary to the recommendations of the Royal Commission for Inquiring into the Condition of the Poorer Classes in Ireland). The main sources which Lewis referred to throughout the book in order to bolster his proposals were the publications of others since the mid eighteenth century and extensive extracts from a range of official government and parliamentary enquiries, committees and commissions, including a large selection of oral testimony. Enda Delaney has stated that this book 'remains the most insightful contemporary account' of life in Ireland in the decade before the famine. In it Lewis 'rejected racial stereotypes of the Catholic Irish as innately prone to violence' and proposed 'transforming cottiers who lived on smallholdings into labourers who would be paid a regular wage by farmers'.³⁷

Lewis introduced his book by stating that his goal was to examine 'the condition and character of the Irish peasantry'.³⁸ He believed that Ireland was 'still as clay under the potter's hand: the elements of society in that country are still floating in chaos, and await the hand of power to fix and fashion them'.³⁹ He stated that the virtues of those at the top of society were less relevant as the general community increased in civilisation, but he still believed in their significance to a society such as Ireland, which in his view had yet to fully begin its development process. Unlike in England and Scotland, where advances were gained by the slow and steady efforts of individuals, in Ireland improvement and civilisation would only 'descend from above; they will not rise spontaneously from the inward workings of the community'. He emphasised that policy makers in England must not look to 'present exigencies, but to the future welfare of Ireland'. The objective should be to raise 'the Catholic population of Ireland to a level with the inhabitants of Great Britain, not only in political rights, but also in wealth and civilisation'.⁴⁰

Such views of Britain as tutor to less civilised countries were common in the nineteenth century, and were seen to spring directly from the character of the British themselves. As de Nie notes, 'The qualities that made up Britishness included self-control, reason, honesty, love for order and freedom, manliness, character, respect for the law, sobriety, and a firm dislike for enthusiasm or emotionalism. These characteristics uniquely qualified Britain to serve as a mentor

or custodian for less developed nations such as Ireland or India'.⁴¹ David Nally also notes that highlighting the differences and perceived inadequacies of Irish character 'marked the Irish as irredeemably "Other" and paved the way for external intervention. British rule was thus represented as a benevolent act, a moment of rescue and redemption'.⁴²

After outlining his view that England had a responsibility to assist Ireland in its development, Lewis acknowledged that it had made mistakes in its past governance of Ireland. The English had 'supported the Irish Protestants in oppressing the Irish Catholics, who, it was assumed, without that oppression would throw themselves into the arms of France'. This division between the two religions, with one privileged and one deprived, was combined with treating Ireland as 'a province or colony, whose interests were to be sacrificed to those of the mother-country'.⁴³ Such a system of government 'in a country where the people were already in a state of great rudeness and disorder, necessarily led to the degradation and demoralizing of the bulk of the population'.⁴⁴

Lewis believed that the only way conditions in Ireland would improve was to 'alter the mode of subsistence of the Irish peasant: to change him from a cottier living upon the land to a labourer living upon wages: to support him by employment for hire instead of by a potato-ground'. This change could only come about by consolidating the current small holdings and 'creating a class of capitalist cultivators, who are able to pay wages to labourers, instead of tilling their own land with the assistance of the grown-up members of their family'.⁴⁵ The clear presumption was that the reformed 1834 poor law would provide a safety net for the tenants and encourage them to pursue wage labour with the knowledge that state sponsored relief would be available if ever needed:

There seems no hope that the society will, by its spontaneous efforts, work out a cure; so far from it, that the rapid and inevitable tendency is from bad to worse. The law alone can furnish a remedy; by its assistance alone can the transition of the peasantry from the cottier to the labourer state be effected. What is wanted is to give the peasant some third alternative besides land and starvation, by which he may be induced to relax that desperate grasp with which he clings to his potato ground. This alternative (as it

⁴¹ de Nie, *Eternal Paddy*, 23. For discussions of British travel writers and their views of the Irish peasantry in the decades both before and after the famine, see W.H.A. Williams, *Tourism, Landscape, and the Irish Character*, Madison, 2012; G. Hooper, *Travel Writing and Ireland, 1760–1860, Culture, History, Politics*, Basingstoke, 2005; and A. Hadfield, and J. McVeigh (Eds), *Strangers to that Land: British Perceptions of Ireland from the Reformation to the Famine*, Lanham, 1994.

⁴² D. Nally, Race, in: J. Morrissey, D. Nally, U. Strohmayer, and Y. Whelan (Eds), *Key Concepts in Historical Geography*, London, 2014, 110. For interesting discussions of parallels between past and more recent attempts by richer and more powerful countries to 'civilise' and 'develop' poorer nations, see T.M. Li, *The Will to Improve: Governmentality, Development, and the Practice of Politics*, Durham, 2007; A. Escobar, *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World*, Princeton, 2012; and M. Duffield, and V. Hewitt (Eds), *Empire, Development & Colonialism: The Past in the Present*, Cape Town, 2013.

⁴³ Lewis, *On Local Disturbances*, 47.

⁴⁴ Lewis, *On Local Disturbances*, 48.

⁴⁵ Lewis, *On Local Disturbances*, 319. For a discussion of race and nationality in Victorian England, see P. Mandler, 'Race' and 'Nation' in mid-Victorian thought, in: S. Collini, R. Whatmore, and B. Young (Eds), *History, Religion and Culture: British Intellectual History, 1750–1950*, Cambridge, 2000, 224–244.

³⁷ E. Delaney, *The Great Irish Famine: A History in Four Lives*, Dublin, 2014, 32.

³⁸ Lewis, *On Local Disturbances*, preface, iii.

³⁹ Lewis, *On Local Disturbances*, preface, v–vi.

⁴⁰ Lewis, *On Local Disturbances*, preface, vi.

seems to me) can alone be furnished by a LEGAL PROVISION FOR THE POOR.⁴⁶

Whilst a poor law could have negative consequences for character, these would be outweighed by the positive results: 'If the legal right to relief produces improvidence, insolence, and shamelessness, it also produces a feeling of security for the future, and the absence of fraud and servility in order to gain relief'. Lewis emphasised that just because the poor laws had in some cases been administered in a way which produced undesirable results, this did not mean that the absence of all legal relief was good: 'The reverse of wrong is not always right. The natural system may, in a diseased state, produce the same results as the abuses of the artificial system'.⁴⁷ Lewis further amplified his point:

However, admitting, as we do, the full force of the arguments against legal relief, which have been urged by Mr. Malthus, Dr. Chalmers, and Mr. Senior, it yet seems to me that there are peculiar circumstances in the present condition of Ireland which nullify all these reasonings. All legislative theories are founded on a certain supposed simple state of things, from which all extraordinary and disturbing forces are abstracted. Hence, in applying theory to practice, it is always necessary to add those facts which exist in the given case, and to consider, first, whether any of the existing facts are *different* from the data assumed by the theorist; and, secondly, whether those *additional* facts which exist in reality are sufficient to counterbalance the conclusion indicated by the naked theory.⁴⁸

Although Malthus was not directly involved in the Irish poor law debate in the 1830s, he had previously expressed his opposition to the extension of the old English poor law in his evidence to the Select Committee on Emigration from the United Kingdom in 1827. When questioned what he believed the effects of introducing a poor law to Ireland would be he replied 'I should think that the rates would very soon absorb the rentals of all the estates'. When asked whether a poor law would alleviate or increase the misery in Ireland Malthus stated that 'I think on the whole, and finally, it would aggravate it'.⁴⁹ In his earlier writings on Ireland Malthus had blamed the penal laws for degrading the Catholic population, which had in turn encouraged early marriages and the subdivision of land which then resulted in the over-reliance on potatoes and subsequent rapid population growth and widespread poverty. According to Alison Bashford and Joyce E. Chaplin, Malthus believed that 'the poor in Ireland needed to be treated with greater respect by their superiors. With the introduction of civil and political liberties, and especially with education, people who respected themselves more and expected higher comforts for themselves and their children would marry later'.⁵⁰ Although Lewis would have agreed with Malthus on the negative effects of the penal laws on the social, economic and political landscape of Ireland (and the Irish character), crucially he felt that establishing a poor law was an essential step towards remedying rather than exacerbating these past mistakes.

Like Malthus, both Chalmers and Senior had previously explicitly argued against the creation of an Irish poor law. Chalmers, who had once been described by Malthus as 'my ablest and best ally', gave evidence to the 1830 Select Committee on the State of the Irish Poor and made clear his belief that a poor law should not be established in Ireland.⁵¹ When questioned whether his views on the 'evils' of the poor law in England would apply to a country 'not in a high state of civilisation', he answered 'I think that if the principle of assessment for the relief of poverty be introduced, it will deteriorate the condition of any country'. He continued, noting that if a poor law was introduced 'it would just add to the recklessness and improvidence of the people, and so land the country in a still greater population without increased means of maintaining them'. Chalmers advised that education should be made compulsory and that people 'should weather for a season the annoyance of Ireland's mendicity, and the annoyance of that pressure', which he believed would be 'altogether temporary'.⁵² Although Lewis had no arguments against extending education provision in Ireland he differed from Chalmers in believing that a poor law was integral to, rather than an obstruction of, the vital process of developing the Irish character and the wider economy.

Senior had first made his opposition to an Irish poor law clear in his *Letter to Lord Howick* in 1831. In it he noted that he had added some extracts of the evidence given by Chalmers to the Select Committee on the State of the Poor in Ireland during the previous year 'partly to shew that my own views are supported by his authority, and partly in the hope of drawing attention to the whole of his evidence – the most instructive, perhaps, that ever was given before a Committee of the House of Commons'.⁵³ Senior's position in 1831 was that a poor law in Ireland would promote dependence, indolence and helplessness and reduce frugality, industry and charity. In April 1836, after writing the 1834 Poor Law Report with Edwin Chadwick which formed the basis of the new poor law Senior was asked by Home Secretary Lord John Russell to examine the feasibility of the proposals outlined in the royal commission's third report. In his response to Russell, Senior reiterated his opposition to an Irish poor law and noted his previous *Letter to Lord Howick* clarifying that 'the only change that subsequent experience has produced in my opinion is, that I now believe that in England, or in any other country in which the standard of subsistence is high, a provision for the able-bodied in strictly managed workhouses, in which their condition shall be inferior to that of the independent labourer, may be safely, and even advantageously, made. But as this is not the state of Ireland ... this change of opinion does not apply'.⁵⁴ Lewis, while accepting that a poor law could have some negative effects on frugality, industry and charity, nonetheless believed that the positive effect of providing state relief as a last resort rather than forcing the poorest to rely solely on the land for survival would be of overall benefit to Ireland's economy

⁵¹ Cited in A.M.C. Waterman, *Revolution, Economics & Religion: Christian Political Economy, 1798–1833*, Cambridge, 1991, 228.

⁵² *Second Report of Evidence from the Select Committee on the State of the Poor in Ireland*, P.P. 1830, 654, 312, 315.

⁵³ N. Senior, *A Letter to Lord Howick, on a Legal Provision for the Irish Poor, Commutation of Tithes, and a Provision for the Irish Roman Catholic Clergy*, London, 1831, 3. Henry George Grey (Viscount Howick 1807–1845) later 3rd Earl Grey, was under-secretary at the colonial office 1830–1833 and the eldest son of the 2nd Earl Grey, prime minister 1830–1834.

⁵⁴ *Poor Laws, Ireland. Confidential. Letter from Nassau W. Senior, Esq., to His Majesty's Principal Secretary of State for the Home Department, on the Third Report from the Commissioners for Inquiring into the Condition of the Poor in Ireland*, P.P. 1837, 90, 4.

⁴⁶ Lewis, *On Local Disturbances*, 321.

⁴⁷ Lewis, *On Local Disturbances*, 322.

⁴⁸ Lewis, *On Local Disturbances*, 322–323 (emphasis in the original).

⁴⁹ *Third Report from the Select Committee on Emigration from the United Kingdom*, P.P. 1826–27, 550, 313.

⁵⁰ A. Bashford and J. E. Chaplin, *The New Worlds of Thomas Robert Malthus: Rereading the Principle of Population*, Princeton, 2016, 220.

and people.⁵⁵ He also disagreed with Senior's understanding of the features central to the successful operation of the principle of less-eligibility, believing that it was the regime and confinement which were the important conditions and not the standard of food or shelter.

Lewis made clear that his reason for disagreeing with Malthus, Chalmers and Senior was that the 'peculiar circumstances' which existed in Ireland, namely the over-reliance on subsistence agriculture, extensive poverty and degraded peasantry were 'sufficient to outweigh the general arguments against compulsory relief'.⁵⁶ What was needed, he believed, was a method of breaking the peasantry's over-attachment to, and over-reliance on, land and the vicious circle of unemployment and under-investment made worse by violence. The poor law could be this 'fire break' by giving a clear signal that the state would provide relief in times of distress (Lewis advocated an explicit right to relief tempered by the workhouse test) and also offer a sense of security which would encourage more private investment and help to make a more productive, capitalist and 'English-like' society in Ireland. Nally highlights that if 'the promotion of agrarian capitalism was the obvious panacea to Irish underdevelopment, the aim of the Government policy (vis-à-vis the Poor Law) was to ... disencumber Irish property of its smallholders'.⁵⁷

Lewis wished to emphasise the importance of the poor law not only as a system of relief for the poorest and most desperate in Ireland but also as central to helping change the entire society: 'Poor-laws are (in my opinion) imperatively needed in Ireland, not in order merely to provide for widows, deserted children, and orphans; not in order to prevent Protestant landlords ejecting their Catholic tenants for electioneering purposes; not in order to stop the immigration of the Irish into Great Britain; not in order to raise the price of corn, and to diminish the exportation of Irish agricultural produce'; but in order to give the Irish peasant security and assist in the transition from small to large landholdings and 'from the rude to the systematic mode of cultivation'.⁵⁸ Thus the poor law would act as a foundation stone upon which a more prosperous and peaceful Ireland could be built, facilitating a transformation of the Irish character and a complete moral, social and economic revolution.

Although arguing that the state must provide relief to those in need, Lewis stressed that it was not the responsibility of the government to find employment for the whole population. The state was neither designed for, nor efficient at, performing the function of the capitalist. It could merely remove obstacles to improvement:

A wise government would never undertake directly so hopeless an object, and one so plainly lying out of the sphere of its proper duties, as that of finding employment for a whole population. The cases where governments have traded on a much smaller scale have so decisively proved their unfitness to perform the part of the capitalist, that a much more signal failure might be anticipated if the Irish government undertook to manage a farm of several million acres.⁵⁹

⁵⁵ For a discussion of the contested boundaries between voluntary and statutory poor relief in both the English and Irish contexts, see J.P. McGauran and J. Offer, A philosophy of charity and the debates over the English and Irish poor laws in the 1830s, *Social Policy & Administration* (2015) <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/spol.12191>.

⁵⁶ Lewis, *On Local Disturbances*, 324.

⁵⁷ D. Nally, The colonial dimensions of the great Irish famine, in: J. Crowley, W.J. Smyth and M. Murphy (Eds), *Atlas of the Great Irish Famine*, Cork, 2012, 68.

⁵⁸ Lewis, *On Local Disturbances*, 324.

⁵⁹ Lewis, *On Local Disturbances*, 329.

Lewis concluded his book by highlighting the continued importance of large-scale emigration, believing that, although extensive emigration on its own would not solve Ireland's huge redundancy of population, it would be of great assistance: 'If Ireland (as it was once remarked to me) could be stretched out like a piece of India rubber, the peasantry would be as tranquil and contented as that of England. But as this is impossible, we must strive to do what is possible. As we cannot make more land to the inhabitants, we must make fewer inhabitants to the land'.⁶⁰

After completing *On Local Disturbances* Lewis wrote to his friend Edmund Head confessing that his experiences while working for two royal commissions into Irish matters had altered his earlier views of the influence of race on the Irish character. He had instead moved to an environmentalist position, believing that it was the different social, political and economic conditions of the two countries that were the cause of any differences between the British and Irish character. Consequently if character was mutable then changing the circumstances in Ireland, via the introduction of a poor law, would result in positive improvements in both the actions of, and outcomes for, the Irish peasantry:

Before I went to Ireland I had very strong opinions as to the influence of *race* on the Irish character. When I came to look at things more nearly, and to see all the demoralizing influences to which they have been subjected, I asked myself whether a people of Germanic race would have turned out much better; and I really could not answer in the affirmative.... *Cæteris paribus*, I would rather have a German than a Celt, a Protestant than a Catholic; but I have no doubt that a peasantry of Catholic Celts may be so governed and placed under such moral influences as to be peaceable, industrious and contented; and I have no doubt that a peasantry of Protestant Germans might, if properly oppressed and brutalized, be made as bad as the Irish.⁶¹

Edward G. Lengel has noted that one of the main arguments for having the same laws and structures in both England and Ireland was that 'Irish moral improvement' was considered possible, 'but only after generations of tutorship under English law and the English middle class. The object at hand was therefore to enforce a uniform system of law throughout the British Isles'.⁶² Richard Ned Lebow has similarly observed that those who argued for the strengthening of the Union believed that 'the major problem of Ireland was the character of its people and that prosperity and tranquillity would never be achieved without a prior *moral* reformation of the native Irish'.⁶³ It is clear that Lewis viewed the recently reformed poor law as an essential part of this process of enlightened development, not only in economic and moral terms, but also as a visible and tacit example of equality of treatment of the poor throughout the Union.

Lewis challenges the royal commission

The third and final report of the Royal Commission for Inquiring into the Condition of the Poorer Classes in Ireland was presented to

⁶⁰ Lewis, *On Local Disturbances*, 332. This of course ignores the long debated arguments around the drainage and reclamation of wastelands and the 'internal' colonisation of Ireland.

⁶¹ George Cornwall Lewis to Edmund Head, 9 April 1836, Lewis, *Letters*, 49–50.

⁶² Lengel, *The Irish Through British Eyes*, 10.

⁶³ R.N. Lebow, *White Britain and Black Ireland: The Influence of Stereotypes on Colonial Policy*, Philadelphia, 1976, 31.

the government in March 1836.⁶⁴ It strongly argued against any extension of the new English poor law to Ireland noting that 'We are of the opinion that the provision to be made for the poor in Ireland must vary essentially from that made in England. The circumstances of the two countries differ widely; and the legislation, we submit, should have reference to circumstances as well as to principles'. It appeared that the workhouse system in England was used not to set the able-bodied to work but rather to prompt them to take responsibility for themselves and their own resources and to encourage migration. In Ireland, the commissioners believed it was not necessary to establish workhouses to produce this effect, since the difficulty was 'not to make the able-bodied look for employment, but to find it profitably for the many who seek it'. The commissioners estimated that if workhouses were established in Ireland they would need to provide accommodation for an estimated 585,000 unemployed men and 1.8 million dependants for at least thirty weeks of the year at an annual cost of £5 million. The commissioners believed that the workhouse was not designed for 'permanent domiciliation', but as temporary support. Since 'actual relief is required by the able-bodied in general in Ireland ... the workhouse system, as applied to them, must prove illusory'.⁶⁵ The commissioners also challenged the argument that England, with the poor laws, had flourished in comparison to Ireland, without them: 'Because extraordinary strength has withstood poison, it does not follow that poison should be prescribed as a remedy for weakness'.⁶⁶

Instead of instituting the new poor law in Ireland the commissioners recommended that rates should be levied for the legal provision of relief for all who laboured 'under permanent bodily infirmities'. Assistance should be provided within public institutions including hospitals and infirmaries. Convalescent establishments should provide for the sick poor, and food and medicine could also be delivered if the patient was unable to leave their home. In addition taxes would fund an emigration scheme, penitentiaries for vagrants, a board of improvement to reclaim wastelands and improve dwellings, and local agricultural schools to improve farming methods and increase and diversify production. Voluntary associations, supervised but only partially funded by the government, would provide for the maintenance of deserted children, the aged and infirm, orphans, widows with young children, the families of sick persons and those suffering 'casual destitution'.⁶⁷

Writing to Head after extracts from the report had been published in the newspapers, Lewis made it clear that he was deeply unimpressed by its recommendations. He scornfully attacked the commissioners for both what they had done and what they had failed to do: 'It sins both in excess and defect; it does NOT contain an account of the state of the people, the causes and extent of their poverty, and the effects which it produces on them; and it *does* contain all kinds of absurd projects which I hope that no sane government will ever think of introducing'.⁶⁸

Having been equally unconvinced by the royal commission's extensive (and expensive) recommendations for Ireland, the govern-

ment asked Lewis to give his opinions in a private report to the chancellor of the exchequer, Thomas Spring Rice.⁶⁹ This was published the following year as *Remarks on the Third Report of the Irish Poor Inquiry Commissioners*. It did not involve Lewis undertaking any new research or presenting any new evidence (understandable given his experience writing both *Appendix G* and *On Local Disturbances*), but rather contained a forensic analysis of the royal commission's third report. Lewis noted that the commissioners had recommended a right to relief for only the sick, with only a right to emigration for the much greater number of able-bodied poor. He pointed out that in England an able-bodied person unable to obtain employment could apply for relief in a workhouse on that basis, whereas in Ireland indigence in an able-bodied person would lead only to the offer of emigration: 'It is therefore to be expected that many persons would seek to obtain, upon the false pleas of sickness, that which they would not be able to obtain upon the true plea of destitution'.⁷⁰

The arrangements for one of the (many) classes of the incapacitated poor for which the commissioners had recommended relief – the casual destitute – proved particularly objectionable for Lewis. Since the term 'casual' had not been explained, the commissioners had in effect offered relief to the whole population as long as the destitution that was suffered was casual. Indeed, it was hard to discern to whom it had actually been intended to apply, and in what circumstances. Lewis believed that whilst trying to limit relief to certain classes, the commissioners had instead opened it to all and as a result increased the chances of deception and corruption. According to Peter Mandler, 'G.C. Lewis pointed out that, in straining to exclude the right to relief from Ireland, Whately had had to compensate by opening the door to other, more dangerous, state interventions in the natural economic order. Indoor relief might be the lesser of evils'.⁷¹ Lewis was adamant: 'On the whole it appears to me that the plan of limiting the right to relief to certain classes of the population is radically unsound; that it would increase the mischiefs and curtail the advantages of a Poor Law'.⁷² Relief instead should be provided on the basis of need that was demonstrable, that is, destitution.

Lewis also commented on the objection often raised against establishing the workhouse system in Ireland, namely that it was impossible to make the conditions within the workhouse lower or less-eligible than the conditions of the ordinary independent labourer. Lewis stated that it was true that the diet and physical comforts could not be made lower within the workhouse than those outside but it was not these conditions that acted as the workhouse test but rather the compulsory labour, discipline and classification. He argued that, 'The principle of the workhouse is simply this: offer everybody relief, but in such a mode that none but those in real want will accept it. This principle is just as applicable to one country as to another. Restraint

⁶⁴ For further discussion of the commissioners' recommendations, see J.P. McGauran and J. Offer, Christian political economics, Richard Whately and Irish poor law theory, *Journal of Social Policy* 44 (2015) 43–61.

⁶⁵ *Third Report of the Commissioners for Inquiring into the Condition of the Poorer Classes in Ireland*, P.P. 1836, 43, 5.

⁶⁶ *Third Report*, 7.

⁶⁷ *Third Report*, 5.

⁶⁸ George Cornwall Lewis to Edmund Head, 9 April 1836, Lewis, *Letters*, 48 (emphasis in the original).

⁶⁹ No correspondence has been identified which shows exactly who requested Lewis to comment on the commission's *Third Report*, or what exact instructions he was given but the government could have been in no doubt of his views on the issue.

⁷⁰ *Poor Laws, Ireland. (Confidential) Remarks on the Third Report of the Irish Poor Inquiry Commissioners; Drawn up by the Desire of the Chancellor of the Exchequer, for the Purpose of being Submitted to His Majesty's Government; with an Appendix and Supplementary Remarks. By George Cornwall Lewis, Esq., P.P. 1837*, 91, 4.

⁷¹ P. Mandler, Tories and paupers: Christian political economy and the making of the new poor law, *The Historical Journal* 33 (1990) 101.

⁷² Lewis, *Remarks*, 6.

and confinement are as disagreeable in Ireland as they are elsewhere'.⁷³

Lewis again repeated his belief that Ireland had suffered misgovernment by the English through the penal laws and confiscations, which had broken up the framework of society and helped to destroy any respect for law and morality.⁷⁴ Catholics were treated as outlaws in contrast to Protestants, who were supported by the English. This had led to a division within Irish society between a privileged class and a degraded and demoralised class:

The occupants and cultivators of the soil, whether farmers or labourers, not only suffered from the reckless and prodigal habits of their landlords, but also, being for the most part Catholics, were degraded by the penal code enforced against all persons of that persuasion. This state of things prevented a careful and scientific mode of farming, and the accumulation of capital among the cultivators of the soil; and it led to the multiplication of the peasantry far beyond the means of employment.⁷⁵

Home secretary Lord John Russell held similar views about past misgovernment by England, and expressed the opinion that England was 'bound to look with regret to her 400 years, from 1430 to 1829, during which period she did everything in her power to check the industry, to repress the manufacturers, to persecute the religion, and to confiscate the rights of the Irish people'.⁷⁶ However, the prime minister, Lord Melbourne, did not agree and reported to Russell that he had never thought that Irish crimes and outrages 'had much to do with former misgovernment and present politics. I believe them to arise from the natural state of society, which would have been much the same under any dispensation'.⁷⁷ Therefore Melbourne felt that any disorder was as a result of the innate characteristics of the Irish themselves and responsibility could not be attributed to any discriminatory policies which had been introduced by the English.

For Lewis, the workhouse system in England had diminished pauperism among the able-bodied and what were called the impotent poor, those who could not look after themselves. Since relief was granted on the basis of destitution, not sickness or handicap, the numbers claiming such infirmities had decreased dramatically. However, the opposite would become the rule in Ireland if the commissioners' proposal that the only basis for relief would be sickness and infirmity were put in place. The workhouse test could not routinely establish whether a man was aged or if a woman a widow but it could determine if they were destitute. Lewis did not mince matters, driving home the point that the emigration depôts and vagrant penitentiaries recommended would acquire in effect 'very much the appearance of workhouses, only in a rude and inefficient form. In fact, the commissioners seem to me, after having set out with objecting in words to relief of the able-bodied and to workhouses, to end by virtually recommending both'. Any poor persons could go to the depôts where, if deemed unable to work, they would be entitled to relief 'under the directions of the Poor Law commissioners'.⁷⁸ Lewis believed that many would request emigration only to then make false pleas of sickness in order to obtain relief for themselves and their families. Lewis also ob-

jected to the suggestion of vagrant penitentiaries because 'all schemes for making vagrancy penal must fail, where the vagrant has no right to relief from the public'.⁷⁹

Lewis explicitly set out why he disagreed with the commissioners, stating that it was 'of no avail for the Commissioners to urge that legislation should have reference to circumstances, unless they could show that the circumstances in which Ireland differs from England are those which affect the fundamental principles of the English Poor Law; and this they have failed in doing'. According to Lewis the two reasons for this failure were that the commissioners had misapprehended 'the motives which influence the Irish peasantry', and they did not understand 'the character of the workhouse system in England, and the operation of the English Poor Law'. Lewis then listed four reasons why in his opinion the English poor law should be extended to Ireland. First, the success it had had in reducing pauperism in England since it had been reformed. Second, that 'a dissimilarity between the laws of different parts of the same kingdom is an evil in itself, and ought, if possible, to be avoided'. Third, that there existed in England many people with extensive knowledge of the new system which would be of great benefit to establishing the poor law in Ireland. Fourth (in a tacit appeal to Ockham's razor), that the principle of the new poor law was 'simple, definite, defensible and intelligible'.⁸⁰

Lewis also viewed as central the poor law's role as a form of insurance in times of need. He reiterated his earlier point that even if 'it were possible, in practice, to exclude the able-bodied from relief, it would not be desirable, as Ireland can never be tranquil until the peasant feels that he has some third alternative besides land and starvation, which a right to relief alone can give him'.⁸¹ Peter Solar has observed that the old poor law in England had also acted as a form of insurance for the poorest, and its very existence

could influence behaviour, even of those who, never, in fact, had to resort to relief. Seeing poor relief as insurance makes the vital point that its economic impact was not only on the 5 to 15 per cent of the population who received relief at any time, but on the much larger group, of anywhere from one-third to four-fifths of the population, who lived near poverty and might need relief at some time in the future.... Poor relief helped to counter the land hunger so characteristic of preindustrial populations and to tilt the balance in the direction of wage labour.⁸²

Lewis noted that the commissioners believed that if workhouses were established there would be 'resistance and insubordination' but while 'the Irish are disorderly ... it does not follow, because the Irish are prone to disturbance when they are excited by altercation and drinking, that they are therefore hard to manage in a public institution'. From his experience of travelling around cities in England with large Irish populations he had been informed that 'the Irish inmates were remarkably tractable and obedient'. This was also 'in general the character of the Irish labourers in Great Britain'. For Lewis the Irish were 'more violent and irritable', but were 'less stubborn, sullen, and self-willed than the English. The English paupers, moreover, are far more fastidious about their food and accommodation in a

⁷³ Lewis, *Remarks*, 12.

⁷⁴ See W. Smyth, *From Normans to Penal Times, 1169–1800*, Dublin, 1972.

⁷⁵ Lewis, *Remarks*, 13–14.

⁷⁶ Earl J. Russell, *Recollections and Suggestions, 1813–1873*, London, 1875, 350.

⁷⁷ Cited in B. Newman, *Lord Melbourne*, London, 1930, 174.

⁷⁸ Lewis, *Remarks*, 17.

⁷⁹ Lewis, *Remarks*, 18.

⁸⁰ Lewis, *Remarks*, 21.

⁸¹ Lewis, *Remarks*, 22.

⁸² P. Solar, Poor relief and English economic development before the industrial revolution, *Economic History Review* 48 (1995) 8.

workhouse than an Irish peasant, bred up in filth and misery, would be'.⁸³

An added reason why a poor law would be both suitable for, and compatible with, the conditions in Ireland was that: 'In England, whatever you take away by means of the workhouse is so much pure loss; in Ireland, whatever you give by means of the workhouse is so much pure gain'.⁸⁴ This meant that whereas the new poor law in England was designed to reduce and limit both expenditure and public expectations (as compared with the old poor law), and hence would be felt as a loss, in Ireland any relief, even if strictly limited to workhouses, would be an increase in expenditure and provision (because no old poor law existed) and would be felt as a gain by the public, in particular the poorest.

Having dealt with the suitability of workhouses Lewis moved on to discuss the other more general recommendations made by the commissioners to improve Ireland. These he characterised as supporting the principle that it was '*the duty of the state to find employment for the people*'. The commissioners had refused to grant a right to relief as a precaution against establishing a dangerous principle, but Lewis argued, by offering a guarantee that the government would provide employment they had 'inculcated a doctrine far more dangerous and far more opposed to all sound views of political economy'.⁸⁵ The English poor law gave work and support in the workhouse but not one without the other. It had never countenanced wider 'setting to work' schemes as a government measure to improve the condition of the country.

The commissioners had stated that enforced improvements were made in England, but whilst this may have been true for roads and canals which were for the public good, they had, Lewis believed, taken this principle too far by suggesting that the government should underwrite drainage and fencing, or the removal and construction of cabins. Lewis believed that such acts only provided individual benefit and were not of strong enough profit to the whole community to justify the interference: 'This scheme of the government managing everything for individuals is very captivating and plausible at first sight; but it invariably ends by producing lethargy and helplessness in the people, and by counterworking the very end which it is intended to promote'.⁸⁶

Lewis then emphasised what he viewed as the proper role for government in society: 'A government can only, as it seems to me, attempt to accelerate the improvement of the soil by *indirect* means. In this, as in most other cases connected with the *material* part of civilisation, its functions are simply negative; it can do no more than remove obstacles to amelioration, and suffer a society to proceed unchecked in its natural career of advancement'.⁸⁷ Lewis's position regarding the role of government in general and a poor law in particular demonstrates his belief in 'indirect amelioration' – with hoped for outcomes dependent on the choices freely made by individuals – rather than more positive 'direct amelioration' measures in which changes in character are taken to be necessary consequences of particular government actions.⁸⁸ Lewis can be seen as a strong proponent of liberal governmentality with his emphasis on changing the en-

vironment in order to transform the Irish character and in turn 'modernise' and 'civilise' an entire country.⁸⁹

If an effective poor law and emigration system were established, as envisioned by Lewis, this would indirectly lead to an improvement in the state of the country, since private capital would be more effectively attracted to Ireland than by the board of improvement that the commissioners had suggested. Moreover, a poor law would not merely treat the symptoms of poverty but would also provide security and remove hindrances to investment by landlords in their estates (for example by reducing the reliance on land amongst the poorest thus enabling greater consolidation) which in time would help to engineer development and rehabilitate the Irish people and economy.⁹⁰ Peter Gray has noted that Lewis challenged the commissioners' position that a poor law would act as a barrier to agricultural improvement and instead believed that 'an effective poor law would serve as a stimulus to the socio-economic "transition" that Ireland must undergo'.⁹¹

Lewis concluded his *Remarks* by invoking Scotland as an example of how improvements in a country and a people could take place. Development in Ireland would not occur with 'ease or rapidity' but by a slow and sure improvement in agriculture and cultivation, and proper application of 'capital and frugality' on the part of tenants as had been the case in Scotland over the previous fifty years: 'All this has been done by a poor people, with striking disadvantages of soil and climate, by their own unassisted efforts, and without Boards of Improvement, or Commissioners of fencing and draining'.⁹²

Whilst drafting his *Remarks* to Spring Rice, Lewis wrote to Head convinced that he had destroyed the main thrust of the commissioners' report by highlighting its flawed logic:

I have been occupied during the last ten days with writing remarks on the report of the Irish poor commissioners. They will I believe, be printed privately, for the use of the Government; ... the Irish commissioners would probably send over a detachment of Whiteboys to dispatch me if they found out that I criticised their performance in so insidious a manner. I flatter myself that I have made a complete smash of them, but of this you will judge when I show you in the country what I have written. Their utter misconception of the entire subject, both the state of Ireland and the English poor law, is less provoking than the impudent way in which they beg the question while professing to argue it.⁹³

Four weeks after Lewis's *Remarks* were completed, Lord John Russell instructed one of the permanent poor law commissioners, George Nicholls, to travel to Ireland to ascertain whether the reformed English poor law could be successfully implemented there.

⁸³ Lewis, *Remarks*, 24.

⁸⁴ Lewis, *Remarks*, 25.

⁸⁵ Lewis, *Remarks*, 27 (emphasis in the original).

⁸⁶ Lewis, *Remarks*, 29.

⁸⁷ Lewis, *Remarks*, 30 (emphasis in the original).

⁸⁸ The contested debates over direct and indirect means of improvement in both the English and Irish contexts are discussed in J. Offer, 'Virtue', 'citizen character', and 'social environment': social theory and agency in social policy since 1830, *Journal of Social Policy* 35 (2006) 283–302.

⁸⁹ See M. Foucault, Governmentality, in: J.D. Faubion (Ed.), *Essential Works of Foucault 1954–1984*, New York, 1994, 201–222; and P. Joyce, History and governmentality, *Analise Social* 49 (2014) 752–756.

⁹⁰ For a much wider discussion of attempts to engineer development and civility across three centuries, see P. Carroll-Burke, Material designs: engineering cultures and engineering states – Ireland 1650–1900, *Theory and Society* 31 (2002) 75–114; and P. Carroll, *Science, Culture, and Modern State Formation*, Berkeley, 2006.

⁹¹ P. Gray, *The Making of the Irish Poor Law 1815–43*, Manchester, 2009, 137.

⁹² Lewis, *Remarks*, 31.

⁹³ George Cornwall Lewis to Edmund Head, 15 July 1836, Lewis, *Letters*, 54. The Whiteboys were a secret Irish agrarian organisation in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries that used violent tactics to defend tenant farmer land rights for subsistence farming. Their name was derived from the white smocks the members wore in their nightly raids. Over time, Whiteboyism became a general term for rural violence connected to secret societies. See M. Beames, *Peasants and Power: The Whiteboy Movements and their Control in Pre-Famine Ireland*, Sussex, 1983.

Over the following two years Nicholls produced three official reports which alongside Lewis's criticisms led to the rejection of the royal commission's recommendations and the establishment of the Irish poor law in July 1838.⁹⁴

Nicholls' arguments in favour of an Irish poor law bore a close resemblance to Lewis's previous work and before he had travelled to Ireland to write his *First Report* the two men had met. When discussing Lewis's *Remarks* Nicholls told him that 'he agreed with it entirely'.⁹⁵ Nicholls' objective however was somewhat different to Lewis's since he had been instructed to lay out the mechanics and practicalities of exactly how a poor law could operate in Ireland rather than focussing on providing an explicit commentary and criticism of the commissioners' recommendations. Nevertheless, by comparing Lewis's *Remarks* and Nicholls' *First Report* it is possible to identify some clear areas of agreement. Both men believed that the principle of less-eligibility could operate successfully in Ireland and both supported confining relief to workhouses. Nicholls like Lewis also argued that the same laws should apply throughout the Union and that rather than resisting the poor law the Irish would be grateful for state sponsored relief. The two also thought that Ireland would have to undergo a difficult and protracted transition period from its current state to one more resembling the economic system in England. However, there were also some notable differences, including Nicholls' concerns with the negative effects of encouraging greater levels of emigration and his belief that the Irish should not be given an explicit right to relief in law.

Conclusion

It is evident from an examination of George Cornwall Lewis's public and private writings on Ireland between 1833 and 1836 that his views on the Irish character, its formation and its potential for development strongly influenced his subsequent policy recommendations for the country. In the existing literature on the Irish poor law debate Lewis's important role has too often been underestimated but as Don A. Smith has observed 'when the Irish poor law was enacted, it was his and not the Irish commissioners' remedy which the law prescribed'.⁹⁶ Lewis's diagnosis of the problem of poverty in Ireland was overpopulation, a lack of investment and an over-reliance on subsistence agriculture. His prescription was the extension of the reformed poor law and encouragement of emigration, and his prognosis was a slow but steady advancement in the moral, social and economic character of the Irish.⁹⁷

In his report on Irish immigrants Lewis identified both the positive and the negative effects higher wages and regular employment had on the Irish character and argued that the economic benefits to Britain outweighed any potential moral dangers posed by the Irish to the native working class. In private correspondence Lewis also recog-

nised that the English actively resisted attempts at assimilation. In his book on Ireland Lewis claimed that past misgovernment by the English was the source of many of the problems in the country and argued that England had a responsibility to help 'civilise' the Irish who were more than capable of improvement under the right conditions. In his report to Thomas Spring Rice Lewis used his views of the Irish character to confidently tackle the main arguments against extending a poor law to Ireland and dissected and derided each of the commissioners' recommendations. In the years and months before George Nicholls had even set foot in Ireland, Lewis had clearly and assuredly outlined how a poor law could help reduce violence, promote investment and reshape the entire economy to more closely resemble the English 'capitalist' model.

Lebow has characterised the position of many of the leading British figures who wrote about and governed Ireland in the nineteenth century as 'defining themselves as hard-working, thrifty and honest, and the natives as indolent, superstitious, and lacking purpose'. This meant that 'the colonial elite, who profited from the *status quo*, could shift the burden of responsibility for the disparity between their affluence and the natives' poverty from themselves to the natives'.⁹⁸ The analysis of George Cornwall Lewis's views set out in this paper demonstrates that whilst he believed that specific features of the Irish character had held back development, he saw these as generated by historical circumstances and not by race. He repeatedly identified previous discriminatory policies of the English as the root cause of many of these character flaws and wanted as far as possible the equal treatment of all citizens throughout the Union. Far from advocating the *status quo* in Ireland, Lewis argued for a complete transformation of the economy which was to be facilitated by the extension of the English poor law with its guarantee of relief (whether able-bodied or not) in times of distress. Felix Driver has commented that the reformed poor law in England in 1834 shows that 'markets in capitalist societies, and labour markets in particular, are constructed, maintained and legitimized through various kinds of state regulation'.⁹⁹ Since the prime example of state regulation in England for over two hundred years, the poor law, had not been present in Ireland, Lewis contended that its establishment was a fundamental prerequisite to the successful operation of a capitalist society.

The focus of this article has not been to examine whether the poor law was either the cause or the consequence of economic development in England or Ireland.¹⁰⁰ Rather it has been argued that George Cornwall Lewis's views of the Irish character influenced his unwavering support for an Irish poor law. Lewis believed that a poor law was an integral feature of a successful capitalist and industrial society and therefore was needed in order to enable Ireland's long overdue transition from an economy based on small scale subsistence agricul-

⁹⁴ *An Act for the More Effectual Relief of the Destitute Poor in Ireland*, 1 & 2 Victoria I, c. 56, 1838.

⁹⁵ George Cornwall Lewis to Edward Ernest Villiers, 8 September 1836, NLW, C/2792. *Report of Geo. Nicholls, Esq. To His Majesty's Principal Secretary of State for the Home Department on Poor Laws, Ireland*, P.P. 1837, 69.

⁹⁶ D.A. Smith, Lewis, Sir George Cornwall, second baronet (1806–1863), *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, first published 2004; online edn, May 2009 <http://www.oxforddnb.com/index/16/101016585> last accessed 12 July 2016.

⁹⁷ For a broader discussion of the entire debate around an Irish poor law in the 1830s, and the main contemporary economic and political arguments over its role in the wider development of Ireland, see R.D.C. Black, *Economic Thought and the Irish Question 1817–1870*, Cambridge, 1960, 86–112; and A. Macintyre, *The Liberator, Daniel O'Connor and the Irish Party, 1830–1847*, London, 1965, 201–222.

⁹⁸ N. Lebow, British images of poverty in pre-famine Ireland, in: D.J. Casey and R.E. Rhodes (Eds), *Views of the Irish Peasantry 1800–1916*, Hamden, 1977, 59. For a discussion of British historian's views of the Irish across the second millennium, see R.N. Lebow, British historians and Irish history, *Eire-Ireland* 8 (1973) 3–38; and for views on race and national character in the nineteenth century, see S. Gilley, English attitudes to the Irish in England, 1780–1900, in: C. Holmes (Ed.), *Immigrants and Minorities in British Society*, London, 2002, 81–110.

⁹⁹ F. Driver, The historical geography of the workhouse system in England and Wales, 1834–1883, *Journal of Historical Geography* 15 (1989) 271.

¹⁰⁰ For this debate, see S. King, Poor relief and English economic development reappraised, *Economic History Review* 50 (1997) 360–368; P. Solar, Poor relief and English economic development: a renewed plea for comparative history, *Economic History Review* 50 (1997) 369–374; and L. Patriquin, Agrarian capitalism and poor relief in England, c.1500–1790: rethinking the origins of the welfare state, *Research in Political Economy* 22 (2005) 3–50.

ture to one of hired labour. As Nally has noted, ‘from its inception the Irish Poor Law was conceptualised as a tool for accelerating socioeconomic transitions rather than simply as a measure for controlling mendicancy’.¹⁰¹ Driver’s argument that the ‘ultimate aim of Poor Law reform’ in England was ‘to inspire self-discipline’ and ‘at the centre of this strategy was the figure of the “independent labourer”’ could equally apply to Lewis’s support for an Irish poor law which was underpinned by his views of the Irish character and its potential for improvement.¹⁰² Yet the ideas and principles underlying Lewis’s support for the poor law were not solely confined to its role in making Ireland’s farmers into wage labourers. He also believed that the same laws should exist throughout the Union and that the Irish character was both compatible with, and would benefit from, the successful operation of the poor law.

Examining the spread of poor laws and agrarian capitalism throughout Europe, Larry Patriquin has argued that a feature central to the establishment of state welfare in all countries was that ‘land and common rights were relinquished in return for income support during periods of “short time” and unemployment.... The *means of production*, which allowed an individual to make a living, were exchanged for the *means of survival*, sums of money so small that they enabled the recipient to be a consumer, but not a self-directed producer’.¹⁰³ Lewis’s particular views, as set out in this article, corroborate such an argument in relation to England and Ireland. Lewis

openly acknowledged that this was the bargain which was central to any extension of the poor law. Irish peasants would have to surrender their grip on unproductive and insecure land in exchange for (a predicted but not guaranteed increase in) opportunities for wage labour and the safety net of state relief in times of need. For Lewis, this contract was essential to Ireland’s future development and civilisation and would in time lead to a revolution in both the physical and social geography of the entire country. It has been argued here that Lewis’s views of the Irish character and its capacity for advancement as expressed in his writings between 1833 and 1836 were central to his political economy and his case for establishing an Irish poor law. Judging Irish character to be capable of change, and subject to the rule of political economy, rather than fixed by race and nature, Lewis envisaged a dramatic change for Ireland and the Irish.

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¹⁰¹ D.P. Nally, *Human Encumbrances: Political Violence and the Great Irish Famine*, Notre Dame, 2011, 101.

¹⁰² F. Driver, *Power and Pauperism: The Workhouse System, 1834–1884*, Cambridge, 1993, 25.

¹⁰³ L. Patriquin, *Agrarian Capitalism and Poor Relief in England, 1500–1860: Rethinking the Origins of the Welfare State*, Basingstoke, 2007, 198 (emphasis in the original).