‘Sources in the National Archives for researching the Great Famine’

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The Great Famine imposed a severe strain on the Irish government. Of the various offices and boards that constituted the Irish administration, the ones which were affected in a very direct way were the Chief Secretary’s Office, the Poor Law Commission, the Relief Commission, and the Office of Public Works. This article is an attempt to bring to the attention of those interested in famine research, whether at local or national level, collections in the National Archives which span the famine period. These collections not only document the actual measures taken to alleviate distress, but are also an invaluable source for other types of research, such as an analysis both of the extent of distress and of government response at local level, as well as the degree to which prevailing theories of government had an impact on the administration of relief.

In this, the first of two articles relating to sources for famine research, the concentration will be primarily on the archives of the Chief Secretary’s Office. The second article will include detailed accounts of the records which are still being processed, namely the Relief Commission and famine related material in the archives of the Office of Public Works.

Chief Secretary’s Office*

As chief executive of the Irish administration, the Chief Secretary naturally had a role in the efforts to alleviate the distress caused by the Great Famine, with his office functioning as a channel for communication between the Treasury in London and such central government agencies as the Relief Commission, the Poor Law Commission and the Office of Public Works, on all matters relating to the disbursement of public monies in the administration of relief. The CSO also received reports, memoranda, letters and memorials concerning the distressed state of the country and the archives of the CSO preserved in the National Archives are an indispensable source for any study of the Great Famine. The Registered Papers of the Chief Secretary's Office, spanning the years 1818 to 1924, consist of one main series of bound volumes which, together with a number of sub-series, are used as finding aids to a main series and sub-series of incoming reports, returns, letters and memoranda. The incoming communications or *papers*, and their finding aids, form the largest class of archives of the former Chief Secretary's Office. In all, there are 337 volumes which serve either as indexes to incoming papers, or

as registers into which abstracts of information relating to these papers were entered, and as indexes to these registers. Subjects covered by the papers include cholera epidemics, cattle plague, economic depression, breaches of law and order and rebellion and political unrest, as are as the more mundane aspects of the day-to-day government of the country, such as the preparation of Treasury estimates, the payment of gratuities and pensions to civil servants, the administration of justice and the prisons and the preparation and enactment of legislation. The incoming papers were received from a wide variety of individuals, institutions and government offices.

The title of the class derives from the way in which these papers were dealt with by the registry staff of the CSO during the period 1840–1922. When received at the CSO, each individual incoming paper was given a unique reference number allocated consecutively from a straight numerical sequence. The registry clerks then entered or *registered* details of each of these papers in ascending numerical order by reference number of the individual paper in large volumes. Thus the registers present information abstracted from each paper in ascending numerical order by paper reference number. Generally, the indexing and registration of papers was conducted on an annual basis, with the first paper received in a given year being allotted the number 1, the second the number 2, and so on. The complete reference number of each individual paper was then a composite of the series title, the number allotted and the year in which it was registered. For example, the complete reference number of the first paper registered in 1853 is cited as *Chief Secretary's Office Registered Paper 1/1853 (CSO RP 1/1853)*, and that of the second as *CSO RP 2/1853*. Once the papers had been registered and the matter to which they related disposed of, the papers were then filed away in numerical order by reference number.

The system of recording information relating to incoming papers altered over the period 1818 to 1922 as various methods were experimented with in order to ensure that the registry of the CSO could produce quickly any available papers on a given subject. From 1818 to 1839, the registry clerks of the CSO *indexed* rather than *registered* all papers and the volumes for these years form annual indexes to incoming papers. It was not until 1840 that the Chief Secretary's Office adopted the system of registering details of all incoming papers in ascending numerical order by reference number in bound volumes designed specifically for the recording of information relating to each paper in tabular format across the full opening of each page, including columns for date of document, date of receipt, from whom received, subject matter of paper and how disposed of.

The system of registration introduced at this date remained in use for twelve years and it thus spans the years of the Great Famine. It was also from 1840 that the practice of amalgamating related papers to form files was adopted as a consistent practice. So, if several papers on the same or a related topic were received in a given year, or over a period of several years, then they were assembled and filed under the reference number and year of the latest incoming paper. As previous papers on a particular subject were removed from their appropriate place for annexation to the latest related paper, the

register entry relating to the paper removed was amended to indicate this fact by the inscription in the register of the reference number of the paper to which the removed paper was annexed.

There was no system of opening and registering of files on a particular subject and of placing all relevant papers in a file jacket as is done at present in many government departments and offices. Instead, files of papers grew or evolved through the amalgamation of individual papers on a related topic, sometimes over a period as great as twenty years, but more often over a period of two to five. Indeed, it was not until the early years of the twentieth century that the practice of even putting each file of accumulated papers in a file jacket was adopted in the CSO. Prior to this, associated registered papers were attached to each other using straight metal pins (hazardous to the physical wellbeing of the documents, to the maintenance of associated papers as part of the same file unit and even to researchers making use of them) and brass paper tacks, or tied together by means of lengths of silk or linen ribbon. In this way, registered papers filed under a particular number may vary in content from a single document to a large mass of papers extending over a period of years. In some instances, files of papers accumulating over a lengthy period of time became extremely bulky and were split into at least two files of more manageable size and the register entry annotated to indicate this. Therefore, from 1840, the annual registers also had to include a column to note the reference number of any subsequent communication on the same or a related subject.

In order to permit access to the information relating to individual or accumulated papers contained in the registers so as to facilitate their retrieval, indexes to the registers were maintained by the clerks of the CSO. There are volume indexes to the registers for each year and each one is divided into alphabetical sections, or cuts, in which all papers received in a given year were indexed under the initial letter of the name of the individual, organisation or institution from which they emanated, or under the subject matter to which they related, and the papers' respective reference numbers recorded. Within each alphabetical cut, index sub-headings/categories were created for the indexing of frequently received papers from a particular official (such as a magistrate), government office, etc., or on a recurring subject matter. For example, the alphabetical cut C tends to have index sub-headings under which were recorded all papers relating to *crown witnesses* and *crown lands*; and the alphabetical cut P, sub-headings for the recording of numbers of all papers relating to *public works, penitentiaries* and the *police*.

When the CSO commenced its registration system in 1840, incoming papers were divided into two categories: *first division*, which related to the maintenance of law and order, and *second division*, consisting of incoming papers relating to all other administrative matters. In allocating reference numbers, all odd numbers were given to first division papers and all even to second division. Separate registers were maintained for first and second division papers with separate indexes. In addition to dividing papers into the above two categories, there was a further refinement of the registration system whereby the reference numbers of all first division correspondence

were given a numerical prefix to denote the county to which the content of the paper related: the reference numbers allocated to all reports of crimes and outrages committed in County Antrim were given the prefix 1, those committed in County Armagh, the prefix 2 etc. Alphabetical prefixes to the registered numbers of all second division papers were used to indicate their subject matter: A – the magistracy and the administration of justice generally; C – crown witnesses, their payment and the prosecution of criminals based on their evidence; E – religious and church matters; F – grants of money to charitable and other institutions; f – levying and payment of fines; G – the administration of prisons; H – Board of Health; I – policing; M – military matters; O – administration of the civil service generally; P – Metropolitan Police; W – public works; Z – miscellaneous.

Researchers who wish to make use of Registered Papers must first search the index to the numerical registers. In the case of research for documentation relating to the alleviation of distress, the indexes to second division correspondence should be checked. Once the registered number has been obtained from the index, the numerical registers should then be consulted. The relevant register entry will indicate from whom the letter was received, the date of letter and date of receipt at the CSO, the subject of the letter, and the way in which the matter was disposed of. The researcher should note the alphabetical prefix given to the paper reference number and whether a later paper was received by checking the subsequent communication column. Where there is an entry of a number in this column the register should be checked under this number and the step repeated each time the subsequent communication column contains an entry. It is only where this column is blank that the paper may be requested under the reference number of that particular entry. The researcher should also note that numbers of incoming papers relating to distress in famine years were given the prefix Z when registered.

Distress Papers (March 1846–September 1847)

The Distress Papers form a sub-series to the Chief Secretary's Registered Papers which were begun in March 1846 when the need to respond to the crisis forced the CSO to give separate treatment to incoming papers relating to distress. That the Distress Papers constitute a sub-series to the main series of CSO registered papers can be seen from the fact that registered numbers given to all incoming papers relating to measures to alleviate distress were allocated independently of the main series, with all papers being allotted reference numbers consecutively from a straight numerical sequence. In addition, the letter D was used as an alphabetical prefix to all of the reference numbers. In contrast to the main series of registered papers, the Distress Papers were not registered in the conventional sense of the word, but were separately indexed in the four volumes listed below:

CSO CR 70 Index to Distress Papers Vol 1, 1846
CSO CR 71 Index to Distress Papers Vol 2, 1846
CSO CR 77 Index to Distress Papers Vol 1, 1846–7
CSO CR 78 Index to Distress Papers Vol 2, 1846–7

The second of the volumes for 1846 (CSO CR 71) was for some time mistakenly considered as an index to volume one (CSO CR 70). However, it is in fact the index to the very earliest of the Distress Papers in the sub-series. There are no registers of Distress Papers and the researcher consulting the indexes does not need to refer to a second numerical register once a search of the Distress Paper indexes has been completed.

Each of the volumes is divided into alphabetical cuts under which incoming papers are entered alphabetically under name of the correspondent. Because so many of the papers relate to particular areas of the country, the papers were further indexed in subsections of the alphabetical cuts under the name of the area to which they related. In addition to the alphabetical cuts, each volume has separate subject matter cuts for the entry of frequently received communications from the Relief Commission, the Office of Public Works, the Treasury and the Home Office. Each incoming paper was indexed in the appropriate section of the register under the name of correspondent, whether an individual or a government department, and the area of the country to which document referred.

When using the Distress Papers, the researcher must first of all check the appropriate alphabetical cut for reference to the name of the individual correspondent. Once this is found, the reference number must be noted and the paper requested using the entry number under which the details of the paper are entered in the index. Other information recorded in the index, such as subject matter of letter, date of letter and of receipt in the CSO, can also be noted – however, the researcher should take special care to check the subsequent communication column and, if there is an entry of a later paper, to consult the appropriate entry in the manner described above so as to ensure that the document ultimately to be consulted is the final document on the matter. If the name of an individual correspondent is not known, the geographical subsections under each of the alphabetical cuts can be checked under the name of the place for which information is sought. This will not only give the number of the Distress Paper, but will also provide the researcher with the appropriate alphabetical or subject matter cut under which fuller details of the paper can be found. Thus the Distress Papers are an invaluable source for those studying the progress of the Famine in a particular area.

The content of the Distress Papers tends to be standard – applications from various localities for the expenditure of monies under the Famine relief legislation; letters from the Treasury concerning the spending of such monies; letters concerning the establishment of relief committees; the calling of extraordinary presentment sessions and reports on the extent of distress among the people.

While the Distress Papers sub-series accumulated as a direct response to famine conditions, there are other CSO records which present a wonderful source for Famine research, often constituting the major source for a particular subject. One such instance is convict management, as the voluminous collection of convict prison correspondence does not begin until the formation of the Government Prisons Office in 1851. It is therefore

essential to examine the indexes to the CSO records including the registered papers described above, for the relevant years under various headings.

Although not specifically famine documents, they nonetheless are a very good source for examining the impact of the crisis on the management of convicts, particularly with reference to its effect on crime and prison statistics, on criminality as a response to distress, and on the effects of distress on prevailing penal theory etc. In this period the most common sentence handed down for what were then considered serious offences, was that of transportation to Van Diemen's Land (Tasmania), usually for a period of seven years (the other terms were ten years, fourteen years, or life). The term *convict* referred to the more serious offender who received a sentence of either death or transportation (after the passing of the Penal Servitude Act in 1853, the sentence of penal servitude replaced that of transportation). Until the passing of the General Prisons Act in 1877, all aspects of convict management, including the transportation system, were under direct government control, and expenses incurred in the administration of the Convict Department were financed from exchequer funds. Local prisons, housing the less serious offenders (usually referred to as local prisoners), under the direct management of the Grand Juries, were funded from the local rates and were subject only to government inspection, not control. Convicts were usually housed separately in local or county gaols, however, while awaiting the carrying out of their sentence.

Subjects covered in these papers include supervision of convicts prior to embarkation, the engagement and fitting out of convict vessels, the supply of provisions and medicines for the voyage, conveyance of convicts to the ships for embarkation, medical inspection of convicts prior to embarkation, provision for the transporting of convicts' children etc. At the outbreak of the famine, pressure from the Australian authorities for the ending of the system was so severe that it was decided in 1846 to suspend temporarily all transportation of Irish males for the following two years. This coincided with a large increase in transportation sentences due to the Famine, and caused a crisis in the Convict Department. The problem was avoided with respect to female convicts, as the numbers of females sentenced to transportation during 1847 did not increase at the same rate as the males.

In the ensuing interval, the haphazard ticket-of-leave arrangement was tightened up and the system was completely re-modelled under the secretary of state for the colonies, Lord Grey. Under the old system, the convicts, having been embarked as soon as possible after receiving their sentence, worked for unspecified periods in domestic service or in public labour gangs. Pending good conduct, they eventually received – at the governor's discretion – a conditional pardon or ticket-of-leave. This excused convicts from compulsory labour, allowing them to work for themselves. The new re-modelled system which was put into operation when the transporting of males was resumed in 1848, was a three stage system known as the exile system. Under the exile system each convict was to spend between 12 and 18 months in solitary confinement in prison at home, one to three years on public works

in Gibraltar or Bermuda (this applied only to men), leading to the third stage which was transportation to Australia on ticket-of-leave.

This re-modelled system contained many inconsistencies, not least of which was its lack of clarity in relation to female convicts. As there was no equivalent to the public works at Gibraltar and Bermuda for women, the intention seems to have been that facilities would be made available to aid reformation, both in prison and on board ship. (The term usually adopted to illustrate the requirement for successful reformation was *moral and industrial training*.) This process was to continue on arrival in the colony, where they were to be removed to a new penitentiary to be built near Hobart in Tasmania (transportation to New South Wales ended in 1842). The new penitentiary was to replace two old run-down barracks used to house the convicts, one near Hobart and the other at Launceston. After six months reformatory treatment there, a process would begin leading to a probation pass on release. Like the ticket-of-leave, this would enable them to enter employment.

It was not possible to operate this system in Ireland because lack of accommodation made it impossible to fulfil the strict 12 to 18 months of solitary confinement which constituted the first phase of the regime. Accommodation consisted of a temporary depot which had been opened at Spike Island in 1846 for men and depots at Cork and Grangegorman, Dublin, for women, both of which were overcrowded because of the increased intake due to the famine. The CSO correspondence charts this decline of the system. In l849, a proposal was put forward by Lord Grey that, instead of all Irish convicts being allowed to travel with tickets-of-leave, which was now the case, only those with the minimum sentence of seven years who were well behaved could in future do so. For those with longer sentences it was planned to commute their sentence to terms of imprisonment to be served at home (1). As well as seeking the approval of the governor of Van Diemen's Land in this matter he also asked if he might himself arrange some training for Irish transportees on their arrival which would *prevent them being too suddenly exposed to the temptations of the colony*. It was also envisaged that they would contribute to the cost of their removal from Ireland. (2)

Governor Denison did not agree to this and complained that of the 298 Irish female prisoners disembarked on the *Pestonjee Bomanjee* in January l849, 272 had been convicted in l847 and four in l848 so that, having undergone only a short period of imprisonment, they were now ticket-of-leave holders earning higher wages and living better than they ever could have hoped to do in their native country...they seem not to look on their removal as a punishment. Besides, it was impossible to enforce the ruling whereby they were to contribute financially to the cost of their removal (3). The counter argument put forward by the Irish government, however, was that the crimes of the Irish convicts were not the result of *profligacy and vicious contamination*, insisting that their offences were merely thefts to which they were driven by distress connected with the possession of land or with local feuds and factions:

> *These crimes are not considered by the people to involve the same degree of moral turpitude as they would in England, nor does it follow that their perpetrators, when unexcited by the causes, should be irreclaimable characters. Transportation has till lately, been viewed with the greatest terror by the Irish, and the severance from home and family ties, except where starvation awaits the unfortunate criminal in his own country, has been regarded with much more fear than any term of imprisonment. It is doubtless most desirable that the system of transportation with tickets-of-leave should not be regarded in the light which Earl Grey apprehends nor will there be much danger of this when the precise nature of the liberty they will enjoy under ticket-of-leave shall be impressed upon the minds of the convicts (4).*

Despite the protests, Governor Denison refused in July 1850 to allow any more Irish convicts to travel with tickets-of-leave. Instead they were to go out, as previously, to work in gangs on public works. He declared his decision to be based on their *insubordinate habits* and *subservience to their religious instructors*, which rendered them unfit as settlers (5).

Transportation Registers (1836–1857)

The Irish transportation registers originally spanned the entire period the system was in operation, between 1790 and 1857. Unfortunately, the registers covering 1790 to 1836 were destroyed in the fire at the Four Courts in 1922. The surviving registers, compiled by the clerks in the Convict Department soon after the transportation sentence was handed down, contain the convict's name, age, date of conviction, term of transportation, crime, name of trial judge and name of sessions or assizes where tried. A *remarks* column often indicates the name of the ship on which the convict eventually sailed and the date of sailing, whether the convict received a discharge or if the convict died before embarkation.

Details of males are entered to the front of volumes and females to the back. Entries are arranged under counties, principal cities and towns. The registers were meticulously compiled until 1848, after which, possibly because of pressure on the administration due to the Famine, some of the details are not entered. The volumes are only available on microfilm in the Reading Room at the National Archives. The reference numbers to the relevant volumes are as follows:

GPO TR 6 Transportation Register 1845–1847
GPO TR 7 Transportation Register 1847–1848
GPO TR 8 Transportation Register 1848–1849
GPO TR 9 Transportation Register 1849
GPO TR 10 Transportation Register 1850–1851
GPO TR 11 Transportation Register 1851

Prison Registers

Like the Transportation Registers, the prison registers which span the Famine period are also worth consulting. Because of the level of detail entered, they lend themselves to many types of research into the nature of criminal activity, such as the way in which the severe rural distress resulted in the increase in certain types of crime, and to what extent, if any, this led to a change in the profile of the transportee during the period.

The most comprehensive prison register for the period is the massive volume, containing 3,500 entries, relating to the convicts held at Grangegorman Prison from 1840–1853. Formerly the Richmond General Penitentiary, the prison was established in 1836, and was the first all female prison in the British Isles, housing both local prisoners and convicts awaiting transportation. The convict quarters were entirely separate from those of the local prisoners. The staff of the prison was exclusively female except for the governor, a clerk, a hall porter and six watchmen. Its main function with respect to convicts was to provide employment skills and basic schooling during the three months or so the convicts would be incarcerated before embarkation.

By the outbreak of the Famine, hostility among the colonists was such that they were insisting steps be taken to ensure convicts were trained and educated to the extent that they would be capable of earning their living on arrival in the colony. The number of convicts compared to local prisoners was small before the outbreak of the Famine: on the day of inspection early in 1846, they comprised only 12 out of a total of 287. The numbers increased dramatically over the Famine years, however, often exceeding 300. To cater for these there was a mere 50 cells and four day rooms, and the staff consisted only of the governor and head matron, four deputy-matrons, a store-keeper, clerk, messenger and watchman.

Because of the level of detail it contains and the datespan, it will lend itself to all sorts of statistical analysis with respect to female criminality during the Famine. As each convict arrived at the prison, details were entered into this register. It contains for each convict details of age, crime, sentence handed down, location in which conviction took place, date of conviction, marital status, literacy level, trade or occupation, and number of previous convictions. The reference number of the volume is as follows:

> Prisons 1/9/7 Registry of Female convicts, Grangegorman Depot, 11 July 1840–22 December 1853

There is also a number of local prison registers covering the period – the index to these is entitled Department of Justice, Prison Registers, and can be consulted at the National Archives.

Letter Books
There are for the period, some volumes of outgoing letters from the Convict Department on all aspects of convict management. The main concern during the Famine, however, appears to be the fear of the outbreak of disease in the convict depots and on board ship. There were constant complaints of unhealthy convicts being transferred from the county gaols for embarkation. In 1848, a circular from the head of the Convict Department, Herbert Hitchins, to the governors of all local gaols, requested that only those who were in good health and free from infectious diseases were to be admitted to the depots (6). The volume references are as follows:

CON LB 1 26 May 1845–3 February 1851
GPO LB 1 21 May 1846–3 August 1849
GPO LB 2 27 January 1849–20 December 1852
GPO LB 12 7 July 1849–14 December 1851

Convict Reference Files
It would be reasonable to assume that most transportees were dissatisfied with the sentences meted to them, and sought ways of having them mitigated. Petitioning the Lord Lieutenant was the only real hope of relief. The Lord Lieutenant referred petitions to the trial judge, the local constabulary and sometimes to the governor of the gaol in which the convict had been incarcerated, in an effort to verify the truth of arguments being put forward by the petitioner in support of a mitigation of sentence. These, along with the petition written by the convict or by someone on his behalf, often resulted in quite bulky submissions being returned, known as Convict Reference Files. These were then re-submitted to the Lord Lieutenant, who very often concurred with the opinion of the judge, allowing the original judgement to stand. There are upwards of 10,000 in the National Archives spanning the period 1836–1924 (including local prisoners as well as convicts). Female petitions represent approximately half those of male convicts.

It has yet to be determined, for example, whether there was an increase in the number of petitions submitted during the Famine, if the percentage of successful petitions rose, or whether distress was cited more frequently by petitioners in support of applications for redress. (Of the 103 petitions submitted by female convicts between 1845 and 1852, 49 were successful. Of this number at least 19 were on the grounds of old age, chronically bad health, or large numbers of dependents). Convicts often protested that they could prove previous good character with no prior offences. They sometimes blamed their downfall on the bad influence of other family members or associates, or claimed that, because the judge was using them as a deterrent, the sentence handed down in no way reflected the nature of the crime.

Petitions received during the Famine include those seeking clemency because of the size of their families, with women often petitioning to be allowed to bring their children on the voyage with them. In 1847 Mary Byron wished to bring her three children with her to the colony, but was only permitted to bring two, one aged three, the other aged nine years. The case of

the eldest, aged thirteen, was to be reconsidered when the male convicts were due to travel (7). In 1848 the petitions of Mary and Johanna Kelleher from Bantry, Co. Cork, both of whom were serving twelve months imprisonment sentences, was investigated. It was found that they had committed the offence in order to be transported, as they wished to travel with their mother who had received a seven year transportation sentence. When the real motive was discovered they were discharged and placed on the ship with their mother as free settlers (8). Bridget Devlin got a ten year transportation sentence for forgery in 1848, while her daughter, aged twelve, got a ten month imprisonment sentence for the same offence. She petitioned that the daughter's sentence be remitted to enable her to travel with her mother. The petition was successful (9).

It was very difficult to obtain a mitigation of sentence on health grounds. Pregnancy or extreme youth were not mitigating factors. In 1848 the petition of the relatives of a 12 year old, who pleaded that her sight was failing due to cataracts, was unsuccessful: while it was admitted her eyes were tender, she was not actually blind (10). There is a slight sprinkling of petitions which state the convict's wish to be transported. In 1849 Margaret Byrne from Carlow had her death sentence, which was imposed as a result of an arson attempt made by her on an occupied house, commuted to transportation for life. She stated that she had committed the crime in anticipation of a transportation sentence (11).

Before ordering up a Convict Reference File, the researcher must first consult the relevant Convict Reference Book, which is an index to the files. The files are ordered alphabetically and by year. The relevant references are as follows:

Convict Reference Book, CON CRB 3 (1844–1848);
Convict Reference Book, CON CRB 4 (1848–1850)
Convict Reference Files CRF (1845–1850)

The Office of Public Works

The Office of Public Works, or Board of Works, was in existence less than fifteen years when the scale of the crisis in the potato crop was becoming apparent at the close of 1845. (The OPW was established by an Act of Parliament passed in 1831 entitled an Act for the Extension and Promotion of Public Works in Ireland (1 & 2 Will. IV c.33).

The nature of the Board's response to the catastrophe, a subject of debate among historians, was to concentrate on providing employment for the destitute poor under acts passed early in the parliamentary session of 1846 for the sole purpose of affording relief by employment: 9 Vict. c.1 (public works); 9 Vict c.2 (county relief works); 9 Vict. c.3 (construction of piers, harbours and other works to encourage sea fisheries) and 9 Vict. c.4 (drainage). In August of that year, when the scale of the crisis was becoming clearer, the government was given additional powers to employ the labouring poor by means of treasury loans (9 & 10 Vict. c.107). This resulted in a daily

average of up to 90,000 people being employed that year. The details of the Board's activities were set out in special monthly reports which were subsequently submitted to parliament.

The establishment of the Board, which consisted of three commissioners, including the chairman, was altered by adding two new commissioners and consolidating the duties performed under the legislation relating to drainage, fisheries and Shannon improvement. The number employed on all works (not just relief schemes) during the week ending 26 December 1846, represented ten per cent of the working population. Under the legislation providing grants for the promotion of sea fisheries (9 Vict. c.3), 195 memorials seeking grants were immediately received, 35 of which were successful at a cost of just under £80,000.

Considerable difficulty arose with the nature and quality of the work performed on these relief schemes and in controlling the huge numbers of labourers involved. A major problem was that schemes were largely confined to local work, such as the building of roads, which was generally under the control of the Grand Juries. The limitation of schemes in this way proved unsatisfactory, as some areas desperately needed roads, whereas others did not, and where roads in adjoining districts were to be constructed, a measure of co-ordination was required. This was invariably lacking, resulting in the completion of many schemes for which there was no need or demand. In defence of the work carried out at this time, the Board asked that these works be judged only on the grounds of positive utility and considered solely as an effort to obtain labour in return for subsistence. Another perceived abuse was that of paying wages by the day rather than by the task, so enticing labourers away from farmers and other employers.

The number of destitute rose to almost 750,000 in late 1846, many of whom were unable to work. Between October 1846 and the autumn of 1847, a daily average of approximately 100,000 men were employed on relief schemes under the Poor Employment (Ireland) Act, 1846 (9 & 10 Vict. c.107). Although expenditure on distress was mainly in food relief under the Poor Relief (Ireland) Act, 1847 (10 Vict. c.31), overall expenditure remained at the same level.

Unfortunately, most of the Famine records were destroyed in the 1960s. There is still, however, some material surviving which is an excellent source for research into the period. The most comprehensive is that relating to the fishery, pier and harbour works carried out under the relief legislation mentioned above, where funds were made available for constructing, extending, repairing or improving harbours, piers, quays, landing slips, approach roads etc.

The legislation also provided for making navigable cuts through shoals, connecting adjacent bays or inlets, erecting engines, beacons, or harbour lights, and other similar works useful for the encouragement and promotion of the sea fisheries. No grant was to exceed £5,000 or be greater than three quarters of the cost. The balance was to be provided by a loan charged either

on the county, the district, or the proprietors of adjacent lands. The initiative in making application for such assistance was left to those locally interested. The works, when complete, remained vested in the Board of Works, and were to be maintained out of the rates and tolls collected for their use.

Any resident, proprietor or occupier of land near the seacoast could apply. Memorials signed by the various interested parties were forwarded to the Board of Works, who then requested the government to obtain a report on the feasibility of the project by the Inspectors of Fisheries. The Board was itself, however, responsible for the actual sites of the piers and had to undertake any necessary surveys in regard to these. If the survey and examination of the locality proved satisfactory, the Treasury could provisionally approve the work and sanction the grant or loan. A Provisional Declaration was then prepared, describing the proposed works, stating the estimate, amount of grant and/or loan, time of repayment of loan and rate of interest, indicating also the area to be charged for repayment.

Copies of the Provisional Declaration, maps, plans, sections and estimates were then lodged, for not less than two weeks, in a convenient place (usually a court house) within the county or district from where the loan was to be repaid. A local newspaper was also notified and objections had to be forwarded to the Board within two weeks of the placing of this notice. A public meeting was then called to hear objections, after which the plans could be changed. If there were still objections, another meeting was held.

If the project was proceeded with, all preliminary expenses were to be part of the costs of the works otherwise the applicants had to pay. When the plans and estimate were approved, the work was put out to tender. If a reasonable tender could not be procured, the Board carried out the work itself. When finished, the works were handed over to the counties as public property. This material in the OPW archives carries a prefix OPW 8. Within this series there are files on over 220 fishery pier and harbour works carried out during the Famine. A full list of these is available at the National Archives.

Possibly the most interesting and useful document to be found on practically every file is the application form or memorial. Usually composed by a literate member of the community such as a clergyman, landowner or shopkeeper, they generally gave detailed accounts of the distress in the locality, and many were forwarded to the Board directly from the local relief committees. The signatories were local landowners, often indicating the exact location and extent of their lands, farmers, shopkeepers, clergymen, fishermen etc. Many of the files simply contain memorials and nothing more, indicating that the project was not proceeded with. If a project was approved, the file will contain other documents such as estimates (some of these were prepared in the locality and included with the initial application) and engineers' reports. These give descriptions of the structure and location of the various piers and harbours.

Also on file are Admiralty sanctions, copy contracts, specifications, declarations (to which are often attached plans, sections and estimates), schedules of prices, schedules of tolls bye-laws, lists of plant and machinery required, public notices calling meetings of ratepayers, labour returns (including names, rates of pay and amounts earned by individuals), progress reports and details of expenditure.

The Relief Commission

The temporary Relief Commission was established in November 1845 in response to the failure of the potato crop, to administer temporary relief supplementary to that provided by the Poor Relief (Ireland) Act, 1838. The members of the first Commission represented the various government departments in Ireland which were expected to co-ordinate relief; Colonel Duncan McGregor, police commissioner, Sir James Dombrain, Inspector General of the Coast Guard, Edward B Twistleton, a poor law commissioner, Sir Randolph Routh of the Commissariat Department of the Army, Colonel Harry Jones of the Board of Works, Sir Robert Kane, a distinguished scientist, Theobald McKenna, Assistant Under Secretary and Edward Lucas, Under Secretary. Captain John Pitt Kennedy, former Secretary of the Devon Commission acted as secretary. The Commission was reorganised in January 1846, disbanded in August 1846 and reconstituted in February 1847 under the Temporary Relief Act with Jones, McGregor, Twistleton, Routh and Thomas Redington, Under Secretary, as members.

The remit of the Relief Commission was to advise the government as to the extent of potato loss and distress within Ireland, to oversee the storage and distribution of Indian corn and meal and to direct, support and co-ordinate the activities of local relief committees. The Commission collected information from all local official sources regarding the advance of the potato disease and the condition of the populace. Reports were received from lieutenants of counties, resident magistrates, poor law guardians, the constabulary and the coast guard. These were collated and used to calculate the probable extent of food shortages.

Local relief committees were established on foot of instructions issued by the Relief Commission in February 1846. These were voluntary bodies consisting of local dignitaries, county officials, poor law guardians and clergymen. Their main duties were to encourage local employment, raise subscriptions and to purchase and distribute Indian corn from the depots established by the Relief Commission. The relief committees were financed by local voluntary subscriptions and could apply to the Lord Lieutenant for grants in proportion to the money subscribed locally. The Relief Commission instructed local committees to publish their subscription lists so as to discourage non-compliance by recalcitrant landowners.

They were also directed to maintain lists of residents in every townland, noting the personal circumstance of each and were allowed to issue tickets of employment for public works. This function passed subsequently to the Board of Works, following allegations of mismanagement and the relief committees

were limited to compiling lists of those eligible for employment. By August 1846, some 650 committees had been established. The majority were in the south and west of the country. There were fewer in the midlands and east and none in Armagh, Fermanagh, Londonderry and Tyrone. Local committees were also reorganised on foot of the Temporary Relief Act, 1847.

The Relief Commission was one of the main components of the Peel administration's official response to the Famine. The replacement of Peel with the Whig administration of Lord John Russell and the deepening crisis saw the other components of relief – the public works and the poor law system – assume greater significance and limited the role of the Commission as the central relief authority.

The collection is broadly broken down into an administrative series, a series of distress reports from the constabulary, resident magistrates, lieutenants of counties, and local officials. There is a further series of incoming letters which is broken down into two sub-series: straight numerical from the beginning of the Commission's activities until August 1846, and, when the commission was re-constituted in February 1847, on a baronial basis. They were mainly from local relief committees, lieutenants and deputy lieutenants of counties, local clergy, and concerned citizens. There is also a series of constabulary returns from May 1846, a selection of returns from relief committees and reports from county inspecting officers.

As the listing of the papers of the Relief Commission is ongoing the arrangement is under revision and the main series of inward correspondence is being entered on a database. The collection is available for consultation in the National Archives, and although there is not as yet a comprehensive list available, every effort will be made to facilitate researchers.

*Immediately subordinate to the Lord Lieutenant and appointed by him, the Chief Secretary served as head of the Lord Lieutenant's secretariat. In the latter half of the eighteenth century, the destruction of the *Undertaker* system in the Irish Parliament and its replacement by the installation of the Chief Secretary as a member of the Irish Commons, brought him and his activities into the political sphere to a greater extent. In the aftermath of the Act of Union, the presence of the Chief Secretary in Parliament in London and his position as chief executive of the Irish administration increased his status relative to that of the Lord Lieutenant to the point where the latter was little more than his nominal superior. Several Chief Secretaries would attain the rank of cabinet minister, while the role of the Lord Lieutenant diminished. During the eighteenth century, the separate administrative offices of the secretariat of the Lord Lieutenant evolved into one central office surrounding the activities of the Chief Secretary. Its business was the supervision of the workings of the various boards and offices that constituted the Irish administration.

Notes

1 J. Cornewall Lewis to Thomas Redington, 17 May 1848 (NAI, CSORP/1849/G10919).

2 Thomas Redington to William Denison, governor, Van Diemen's Land, 30 June 1939 (NAI, CSORP/1849/G10919).

3 William Denison to Lord Grey, 31 January 1949 (NAI, CSORP/1848/G10919).

4 William Somerville to Horatio Waddington, 27 June 1849 (NAI, CSORP/1849/G10919).

5 William Denison to William Somerville, 1 October 1849 (NAI, CSORP/1850/G6675).

6 Theodore McKenna to inspector general of constabulary, 10 April, 1848 (NAI, Convict Department Letter Book (1845–1851).

7 NAI, Convict Reference File 1847/B3.

8 NAI, Convict Reference File 1848/K39.

9 NAI, Convict Reference File 1848/D21.

10 NAI, Convict Reference File 1848/H45.

11 NAI, Convict Reference File 1848/B25.

Irish Archives

This article is an online version of the article 'Sources in the National Archives for researching the Great Famine' by Marianne Cosgrave, Rena Lohan and Tom Quinlan. The complete printed version with illustrative examples of the document types mentioned appears in *Irish Archives,* the Journal of the Irish Society for Archives, Spring 1995.

‘Sources in the National Archives for researching the Great Famine: the Relief Commission Papers’

Marianne Cosgrave, Archivist, National Archives

Journal of the Irish Society for Archives, Autumn 1995

This is the second of two articles in *Irish Archives* on famine sources in the National Archives. The first article in the spring 1995 issue dealt with the role and functions of the Relief Commission in the administration of relief from 1845 to 1847. This article provides a more detailed account of the content and structure of the papers of the Relief Commission and addresses the value of the collection as a source for analysing the official response to the famine, the nature and extent of distress at a local level and the measures instituted nationally and locally to alleviate distress.

The Relief Commission was established in November 1845 with a remit to advise the government as to the extent of potato loss and distress, to oversee the establishment of depots for Indian corn meal and the sale of said meal to local relief committees and landlords, to liaise with the Office of Public Works relative to the administration of public works under the relief acts and to support, direct and coordinate the activities of local relief committees. The collection reflects these activities and breaks down into four series: RLFC1 – an administrative series; RLFC2 – a series of distress reports received by the Chief Secretary's Office from lords lieutenant of counties, the constabulary, resident magistrates and local officials; RLFC3 – a series of incoming letters which is broken down into two sub-series: straight numerical from November 1845 to 15 August 1846 at the conclusion of the first phase of the commission's activities and baronial from September 1846 to mid-1847; RLFC4 – returns from the constabulary, county inspecting officers and relief committees relative to the extent of potato cultivation and the activities of relief committees.

RLFC1 – the administrative series is not sufficiently comprehensive to document the day to day administrative activities of the commission, victim perhaps of the over enthusiastic ministrations of an official in the State Paper Office, who described the papers in 1902 as *miscellaneous of very little value,* but they do provide an insight into the workings of the commission. The series includes registers of papers received from the Chief Secretary's Office from September 1845 to April 1846, registers of the relief committees and the names and addresses of officials of relief committees to whom printed instructions, copies of relief acts, minutes and account books and tickets for public works were sent from April 1846 to March 1847 and a register of incoming letters from November 1845 to April 1846. There are also copy minutes of meetings of the commission from 2 January 1846 to 25 April 1846 and on the 8 and 12 June and 15 August 1846. The commission sat at least three days a week and occasionally on six. They considered reports from their officials, entertained representations and deputations from local committees

and lords lieutenant of counties and recommended grants to relief committees.

The series also contains tracings of relief districts in counties Antrim, Armagh, Cavan, Clare, Cork, Down, Donegal, Fermanagh, Galway, Kerry, Limerick, Mayo, Roscommon, Tipperary and Westmeath, applications for positions within the commission, returns of incoming correspondence showing the progress of the blight, the complaints of scarcity, the applications for relief and the response to same for the weeks ending 21 March 1846, 4, 11 and 25 July and 15 August 1846 and replies from consular officials in Italy, France, America, Canada, Germany and Poland to confidential circulars issued in October and December 1845 respecting the 1843–1845 potato crop in their consular districts. The circulars queried the extent of potato cultivation, the nature and incidence of any potato disease, the possibility of exporting potatoes to Ireland and the existence of laws limiting or otherwise affecting the export of potatoes. The replies include a report on the market price of corn and grain in Warsaw and Prague for the quarter ending 30 September 1845.

Also included are: abstracts of cases for relief received from the Mansion House Committee, the coast guard, lords lieutenant of counties, resident magistrates and miscellaneous sources from 14 November 1845 to 9 December 1845; abstracts of letters received by the Mansion House Committee between 11 and 19 November 1845, arranged by county; abstracts of letters from the Poor Law Commission, Poor Law Unions and Office of Public Works from September 1845 to March 1846; and references to employment and suggestions for relief abstracted from incoming correspondence from October 1845 to March 1846.

The administrative series also contains schedules of the applications for committee papers, food, grants, depots and public works, together with the donations recommended in response and general communications referred from the Under-Secretary from 15 October 1846 to 27 January 1847. Included with the schedule for 25 to 27 January are a list of fifty deaths from want nationwide. This is the earliest and most extensive death list processed to date within the collection. The deaths are generally attributed to want of food and destitution and include Patrick McMullin of Magheraculmoney, Co Fermanagh, *a labourer returning home from the public works, his rate of wages not sufficient to support him and his family,* Catherine Reilly of Kilkelly, Co Mayo, *found dead [from] exhaustion from want of food, a living child clasped in her arms,* Jeremiah Shanahan, Harriet Sweeney, Jimmy Houlihan aged eleven months, his sister Mary aged nine years, John Meelihan, Jimmy Connell, Jimmy Driscoll, Cornelius Harrington and Catherine Connelly, all of starvation in Bantry, Co Cork, Thomas Tully of Claddagh near Ballina, Co Mayo, *a pensioner , whose family and himself having 6d a day pension had no pity felt for them* and from Goleen, Co Cork, a *beggar boy, a stranger, found dead, mangled by dogs, want the supposed cause, his body was buried without a coffin.*

RLFC2 comprises transmittals from the Chief Secretary recorded under the Z or miscellaneous series in the registered papers of the Chief Secretary's Office. They date from October 1845 through 1846 and include reports on the nature and extent of potato disease and the incidence of local distress from the constabulary, lords lieutenant of counties, boards of guardians and resident magistrates. Also included are suggestions as to the cause of and remedies for the potato crisis, returns of destitution, petitions and memorials for relief and public works. The memorials derive generally from magistrates, gentry and landed proprietors, but are occasionally sent and signed by or on behalf of the destitute inhabitants of a famine affected townland or parish.

RLFC3 – the series of incoming letters received by the Relief Commission is the most comprehensive series within the collection and consists of two sub-series: RLFC3/1 – numerical and RLFC3/2 – baronial. This article concentrates on RLFC3/1, the numerical sub-series, which comprises c. 5400 letters received from November 1845 to August 1846. The content of the letters tends to be standard: accounts by relief committees and local officials of distress among the labouring population; applications for Indian corn; memorials for public works under relief legislation from relief committees and the distressed; appeals for grants; subscription lists for the relief of the poor; directives from the Treasury regarding the administration of relief and the expenditure of government monies, letters from the OPW seeking information on distress within particular areas, enclosing reports of distress and approving or rejecting applications for public works; distress reports from poor law unions and assistant poor law commissioners; and letters from Richard Pennefather, Under-Secretary, authorising payments to relief committees. Taken as a whole, this sub-series provides a cumulative and comprehensive overview of the first year of the Great Famine.

The efforts of the Relief Commission in November and December 1845 were initially concentrated on assessing the extent of the blight and preserving the remainder of the crop. Reports were received from locals, coast guard officers and OPW officials on the state of the potato crop. Estimates of crop losses varied, none in Finglas (RLFC3/1/117), a quarter in Clifden (RLFC3/1/21), two thirds in Drogheda (RLFC3/I/108), but many reported provision price rises and hoarding by farmers and warned of probable shortages to come. The arbitrary effect of the blight in 1845 is reflected in a detailed report from Constabulary Sub-Inspector John Donoghue, who attributed the delayed return of his report to divergent opinions amongst the clergy, gentry and respectable farmers as to the extent of blight in the Tinahely district of Wicklow (RLFC3/1/267). There was also disagreement within the commission as to the nature and extent of the disease. Sir James Dombrain, Inspector General of the Coast Guard and a member of the commission disputed the assertion of Sir Randolph Routh, chairman of the commission, that the scarcity along the Galway and Mayo coastline represented part of the annual cycle of distress on the western seaboard (RLFC3/1/3474).

The Poor Law Commission issued a regular questionnaire on the potato crop to all poor law unions from December 1845 seeking information on the extent of the blight, the methods used by the peasantry and the unions to preserve sound potatoes and recycle diseased potatoes, quantity of land under potato cultivation, the proportion of the population wholly dependent on the potato, average prices of potatoes, wheat, barley, here and oatmeal, admissions to workhouses, incidence of disease attributable to the crop failure, and changes in labourers wage rates (RLFC3/1/177).

The responses to the questionnaire were forwarded to the Relief Commission. There were occasional replies from poor law unions in Ballymena, Antrim, Skibbereen, Carrickmacross and Wexford, but consistent returns from three particular unions, Ballinrobe, Downpatrick and Newry and they provide a micro study of the social, economic and geographic effects of the famine in the spring and summer of 1846. The Lord Lieutenant, Lord Heytesbury, appointed a scientific commission in October 1845 to suggest means of preserving potatoes which were sound when dug, of utilising diseased potatoes and of procuring seed potatoes for the 1846 crop. Dr Robert Kane was a member of both the scientific commission and the Relief Commission and RLF3/1 contains letters from Kane, his commission colleagues, John Lindley and Lyon Playfair and interested agronomists relative to the inclusion of diseased potatoes in the workhouse diet, the use of lime as a preservative, the propagation of seed potatoes and the construction of properly ventilated storage pits to counteract dampness, which they believed to be one of the causes of the blight. Instructions on the building of ventilation pits were circulated by the thousand, but to no avail. The Inspecting Commander of the Dunkeehan Coast Guard reported on 1 February 1846 that potatoes in fifteen of the twenty pits examined were in an advanced state of decay (RLFC3/1/470). RLFC3/1 also includes letters from Jasper Rogers of Nottingham Street, Dublin, for whom the Relief Commission provided funding to conduct experiments in the workhouse of the South Dublin Union into the extraction of dextrine and farina from diseased potatoes and the conversion of diseased potatoes into wholesome food.

There are also regular weekly returns of the export of potatoes, barley and oats through various ports, and explanations for the calamitous effect of the partial failure of the crop. The Earl of Ross blamed the repeated subdivision of land by tenants (RLFC3/1/2106), others attributed it to inadequate husbandry and problems affecting the conacre system (RLFC3/1/2697). There were also allegations of hoarding by farmers and profiteering by farmers and speculators. The Marquess of Clanricarde, Lord Lieutenant of Galway, warned that speculators were hoarding meal (RLFC3/1/852) and in Cork, the Kilmeen Relief Committee reported that provision merchants were forcing the needy to provide securities to pay for food at fifty per cent above market prices (RLFC3/1/3261).

The Relief Commission received its first application for assistance from Rev Patrick Harley, parish priest of the Aran Islands on 21 Nov 1845 (RLFC3/1/38), but did not receive formal instructions from the Treasury relative to the role and functions of the commission until 21 January 1846 and

did not issue the Treasury approved instructions to local relief committees until 28 February 1846. In the directive of January 1846, Charles Trevelyan, assistant secretary of the treasury, cautioned *that landlords and other ratepayers are the parties legally and morally responsible for affording due relief to the destitute poor, the measures and officers under Sir Randolph Routh to be considered mere auxiliary to persons of property in each neighbourhood. Landed proprietors are not to be superseded by the direct agency of the officers of government* (RLFC3/1/557). In further directives in 1846 Trevelyan insisted that relief should not exceed subsistence (RLFC3/1/3816), sought the cessation of relief at the earliest practicable period and urged more stringent control of relief committees to ensure the proper use of relief funds (RLFC3/1/4068). The government appeared determined to ensure that the landed classes did not abdicate their responsibilities towards their dependents, that public funds were not misused and that the burden of relief would not fall wholly on the exchequer.

The rules, which were intended to govern the formation and activities of local relief committees were published in February 1846. The lords lieutenant of counties were instructed to form voluntary committees in areas of potential and actual distress. The committees were to comprise: lords lieutenant or deputy lieutenants, magistrates of petty sessions, officers of the Board of Works, clergymen of all persuasions, poor law guardians, coast guard officers and resident magistrates and *such other active and intelligent gentlemen as the lieutenant may select.* (RLFC3/1/2209). The main duties of the committees were to encourage local employment, raise subscriptions and to purchase and distribute Indian corn from the depots established by the Relief Commission.

The lords lieutenant of counties and their deputies appointed central relief committees based on baronial divisions and local sub-committees based on parishes and electoral divisions. During the spring and summer of 1846, some 650 relief committees were appointed. The majority were in the southern and western counties, particularly Cork, Clare, Limerick, Tipperary, Mayo, Roscommon and Galway, some in the midland and eastern counties and fewer still in Ulster. In general the committees were appointed and operated without incident, although there were a number of local difficulties: opposition by the Midleton Board of Guardians in Cork to the use of baronial rather than poor law divisions (RLFC3/1/1437); the failure to form relief committees for Mohill, Co Leitrim (RLFC3/1/873) and Ahascragh, Co Galway, because of a lack of suitable personnel and disinterest on the part of the gentry respectively (RLFC3/1/3563); a conflict between the central and sub-committees of the barony of Muskerry West as to the division of subscriptions (RLFC3/1/2983); a dispute between the Nenagh and Monsea committees in Tipperary as to the control of a public works scheme (RLFC3/1/3597); a disagreement between the Kanturk and Kilbrin committees in Cork as to responsibility for the relief of one thousand two hundred paupers in Grenane (RLFC3/1/3644); a complaint about the exclusion of two Roman Catholic curates from the Turlough and Kildacommoge committee in Co Mayo (RLFC3/1/3586) and in Clare, the disruption of a meeting of the Kilkee committee by Rev Michael Comyn and a mob of parishioners (RLFC3/1/343).

Clergymen of all persuasions were active on relief committees. Many served as secretary or treasurer and there were a number of joint Roman Catholic and Church of Ireland secretaries in Cork, Tipperary and Wexford. The clergy were active within their communities and were able to provide first hand accounts of the effects of the famine. The Presbyterian, Roman Catholic and Church of Ireland ministers convened a public meeting to address the state of the poor in Enniskeen, Co Cavan (RLFC3/1/480). In Mayo, Rev Patrick McManus formed an ad-hoc committee to relieve the poor of Kilgeever (RLFC3/1/1884). E.W. Shuldham, chairman of the Dunmanway Relief Committee noted that he had secured the support of the Catholic clergy (RLFC3/1/1782), a priest dispersed a food march in Banagher (RLFC3/I/3857) and the Relief Commission ensured that copies of the printed instructions for the preparation and cooking of Indian corn meal were sent to the parish clergy for dissemination among the people (RLFC3/1/1207).

The primary function of the relief committees was to raise funds with which to purchase and distribute the imported Indian corn stored in government depots. There were depots in all the principal towns, with seventy six sub-depots run by the coast guard and twenty nine others operated by the police. The relief commission was empowered to recommend grants to the committees in proportion to the monies subscribed locally, from a fund put at the disposal of the Lord Lieutenant by the Treasury. The commission instructed the committees to publish their subscription lists so as to discourage non-compliance by recalcitrant landowners. They were also ordered to bring the list of non-contributing landlords to the private notice of the Lord Lieutenant and to forward their subscription lists so as to allow the commission to assess an appropriate contribution.

A large proportion of the RLFC3/1 series reflects the activities of the relief committees and comprises: orders for Indian corn, applications to reduce the price of corn, complaints about the delivery and quality of corn, references to popular prejudice against Indian corn, appeals for subscriptions, lists of subscriptions, lists of non-subscribers, applications for liberal donations in aid of subscription funds and protests at the paucity of the Lord Lieutenant's grant. There were appeals for price fixing to counter profiteering and remonstrations against any interference with the operation of the market economy. In Cork, the Fermoy Board of Guardians appealed for a ban on the export of corn and potatoes and the removal of duty from imported corn (RLFC3/1/151), while in Wicklow, the corn factors, Perrin and Nolan, threatened to withdraw from the corn sector if the government reduced prices to uncompetitive levels (RLFC3/I/3226). Conversely, Perrin and Nolan were generous contributors to the fund for the relief of the poor of Wicklow town (RLFC3/2/9454).

Subscriptions varied, depending on the scale of distress, the effectiveness of subscription drives by committees and the ability and willingness of those targeted by committees to subscribe, but they were invariably characterised as inadequate to the needs of the destitute. The paucity of subscriptions was variously ascribed to the dearth of resident gentry and respectable contributors, suspicions about the use of subscriptions, absentee landlords,

estates in receivership and a preference on the part of some proprietors to relieve their own tenantry rather than assume responsibility for the relief of the tenants of a less conscientious landowner within the same relief district. George Wyndham, replying to a letter from Captain Kennedy, secretary of the commission, dismissed claims that his tenants in Clare and Limerick were a burden on other landlords and asserted that he had provided £1500 for the voluntary emigration of tenants to Canada (RLFC3/l/1255). James Molony of Tulla, Co Clare, attributed his refusal to associate with any committees to the misuse of funds by relief committees in 1822 (RLFC3/1/754). Pierce Mahony detailed his expenditure on the improvement of his estates in the baronies of Iraghticonnor and Clahmaurice, Co Kerry and refused to acknowledge the Lord Lieutenant's right to interfere with his rights as a landlord, implicit in the threat to report him to Dublin Castle for refusing to subscribe to the Listowel Relief Committee (RLFC3/I/3194). A number of landlords enquired about providing relief for their tenants and applied to purchase corn from the government depots. Viscount Harberton sought to purchase sufficient corn to support 2500 dependents on his brother's estate in Carbury, Co Kildare (RLFC3/1/1126) while in Cork, Charles Beamish proposed to establish a model farm on his lands in Doonesky (RLFC3/1/1445) and deplored the commission's dilatory response to his applications for Indian corn (RLFC3/1/4230).

Government grants were conditional on the relief committees acceptance of the regulations drawn up by the commission, namely the sale of Indian corn at cost price, exacting a task of work from those unable to pay and the prohibition of gratuitous relief, except to those who were incapable of giving a day's work, had no relatives to support them and were unable to gain entry to the local workhouse. Most committees agreed to abide by the commission's instructions, but in practice ignored the prohibition on gratuitous relief or applied it at their discretion, particularly in cases of acute distress. Many provided free food to families and individuals from whom labour could not be exacted, but whose removal to the workhouse would have been impracticable. The Raheen Relief Committee in Limerick provided free food to widows, young children, the old, and sick men incapable of labour, whose admission to the workhouse would have left their houses and plots of ground vulnerable to plunder and dereliction (RLFC3/l/3889). Committees also had to contend with popular resistance to the workhouse. In Cork, the Youghal Relief Committee reported 1250 destitute who refused to avail of 400 vacant places in the workhouse (RLFC3/1/3174) and in Mayo, the Ballyhooly and Kilmolara committee hoped that the old and infirm, subjected for the first time in their lives to the affliction of hunger and want, would be spared, *the painful alternative of resorting to the poorhouse, as many of them would rather submit to starvation and death* (RLFC3/1/3206).

The committees were instructed to provide employment for able bodied relief applicants. Many initiated small local improvement schemes which were intended to tide over the period of distress until the opening of government funded public works. In Innishannon, Co Cork, the committee employed 120 to repair roads and footpaths (RLFC3/1/4028), while the Tipperary committee whitewashed all the lower order of houses and dug sewers in response to

increased fever (RLFC3/1/3989). The funds of local committees were usually too limited to support employment over a prolonged period, but delays to the opening of public works and increased demands for relief meant that by the early summer of 1846 many committees had exhausted their funds and in some cases were providing relief out of their private resources. There were many pleas for additional grants and for a relaxation of the rules governing the provision of relief. In Tipperary, the Nenagh Relief Committee sought an additional grant to relieve 4000 paupers and 400 able-bodied labourers previously assisted by the now impoverished committee, while the Kilmichael committee in Cork applied to use the Lord Lieutenant's grant to provide Indian corn at a reduced price or gratuitously to the destitute who had pawned their clothing and bedding and were subsisting on cabbage. A draft reply directs the committee to avoid gratuitous relief by affording employment according to the instructions issued by the commission (RLFC3/1/4205).

Relief committees were instructed to compile lists of the families in every townland with observations as to the personal circumstances of each. These were seen as a means of gauging the demand for relief, preventing abuses and controlling the provision of relief. A few committees forwarded their lists to the commission. Their informational value varies, some record the number of families in townlands, others record the names of distressed families, the number in each family, the number able to work and the quantity of food available to them. In Leitrim, The Mohill Board of Guardians forwarded a list of distressed persons within the electoral division of Rinn (RLFC3/1/1846). In Cork, the Kilshannig Relief Committee compiled a survey of the families with and without housing and land (RLFC3/1/2079). In Clare, the Clareabbey committee listed the men relieved by the committee, detailing family size and amount of land (RLFC3/1/2945) and the Passage West Relief Committee in Cork forwarded a list of indigent room keepers most in need of relief (RLFC3/1/2165). Although the majority of committees did not provide lists, many recorded the overall number in distress and in receipt of relief: 2000 destitute in the parishes of Ballyhea and Ballyhoura, Co Cork (RLFC3/1/3978); 888 relieved in Freshford, Co Kilkenny, in the last week of June (RLFC3/1/3887); 1200 fed daily in Killarney (RLFC3/I/3641) 226 families out of 900 in distress in Partry, Co Mayo (RLFC3/1/2846).

Many relief committees warned of popular unrest, the menacing discontent of the peasantry (RLFC3/112977). These forebodings did not materialise. The incidents of unrest recorded in the papers of the Relief Commission are minor and statistically insignificant: threatening notices in Cavan and Limerick warning against the sale of potatoes out of the area (RLFC3/1/2224) and participation in public works respectively (RLFC3/1/1255); threats to steal cattle and sheep in Mayo (RLFC3/1/3088): an attack on mills and bakeries in Fethard, Co Tipperary (RLFC3/1/1570) and on a cargo vessel of corn in Clare (RLFC3/1/1666); refusal to pay rents in Kilglass, Co Westmeath, with attacks on bailiffs and process servers (RLFC3/1/316); public works in Leitrim vandalised by Molly Maguires (RLFC3/1/3336); food and labour marches in Skibbereen, Co Cork (RLFC3/1/1819) and Lorha and Dorha, Co Tipperary, the latter led by Anthony Moylan, a known repealer (RLFC3/1/1536). Some committees were worried about famine unrest, as is evidenced by their

requests for police assistance to distribute Indian corn, but may also have used the prospect of civil disorder to alert the government to the gravity of the situation and to expedite the provision of relief.

The provision of employment during periods of scarcity was a standard government measure to relieve distress. Local officials, the clergy and relief committees had been clamouring for public works from autumn 1845 and the government introduced additional public works legislation in March 1846. The procedure for initiating public works was time consuming and cumbersome and there were constant complaints from relief committees about delays. The distressed area or committee prepared a public works memorial for adoption at a special presentment session. If approved, it was sent to the Relief Commission and then to the OPW for examination. An OPW engineer or surveyor would then inspect and report on the proposed works. On receipt of his report, the OPW would accept or reject the memorial, cost it and seek funding from the Treasury.

The criteria for approval of public works were stringent, schemes had to be justifiable on the grounds of public improvement and were not to be undertaken at public expense, merely on the plea of affording employment (RLFC3/1/602). RLFC3/1 contains a number of letters from J.C. Walker, secretary of the OPW, rejecting applications because they were not properly prepared, too costly, two extensive or would benefit private landowners unduly. An application by the Earl of Kingston to create an artificial lake in Mitchelstown was rejected (RLFC3/1/1327) and the Freshford Relief Committee in Kilkenny fulminated against the rejection of a memorial because of an error on the part of the inspecting officer (RLFC3/1/3984). Works were also delayed by demands for compensation from landowners. In one instance the OPW asked the Relief Commission to instruct relief committees in Tipperary North Riding to persuade local landed proprietors to allow public works on their lands to proceed and to agree to settle compensation claims at a later date (RLFC3/l/3698). The memorials were mainly for road works, although there were some appeals for the construction of piers and harbours, river drainage and improvements to inland navigation. The series also includes informal memorials from land owners, clergy and the distressed, seeking relief and the opening and extension of public works.

The relief committees were responsible for issuing tickets to relief applicants for admission to public works. RLFC3/1 contains occasional returns detailing the numbers employed on public works, 28511 for the week ending 16 May 1846 (RLFC3/1/2562), 91579 for the week ending 13 June 1846 (RLFC3/1/3363). There were a number of complaints, mainly from the OPW, of interference, mismanagement, and indiscriminate ticketing by committees as well as abuses by stewards. Colonel Harry Jones, chairman of the OPW, complained that the surveyor of the Shannon works in Drumsna could not get enough labourers because the indiscriminate distribution of work tickets by committees was encouraging sloth (RLFC3/1/3009). J.C. Walker worried that agricultural labourers would use the public works as a bargaining tool to increase the price of their labour (RLFC3/l/1461). There were protests about an illiterate overseer in Waterford (RLFC3/1/3944), the non-payment of

labourers in Carrick-on-Suir (RLFC3/1/4172) and higher wages paid to two stewards on works in Aughagower, Co Mayo, the son and cousin of the works superintendent (RLFC3/1/3763). The Treasury subsequently issued a directive in July 1846 limiting the power of relief committees to issue tickets.

The operation of relief through late 1845 and the spring and summer of 1846 was predicated on the assumption that Ireland was facing a short-term crisis which would end with the arrival of the 1846–1847 crop. To this end, the OPW rejected or sought the modification of public works proposals that were too extensive to meet the needs of the emergency (RLFC3/l/3242) and suggested in July 1846 a gradual reduction in the numbers employed on works and a reduction in the rate of pay to encourage farm labourers to make themselves available for the harvest (RLFC3/1/4540), while the Treasury ordered the gradual closure of all the public works from August 8, despite protests from relief committees, who were issuing warnings about the failure of the 1846 crop.

The first phase of the activities of the relief commission were concluded, however on 15 August. According to Edwards and Williams, it had spent £105,246 8s 8d on Indian meal from America and £45,923 0s 1d on meal from Great Britain and purchased oatmeal in Ireland for £6,544. The total expense, including freight, kiln-drying and grinding, came to £185,000, of which £135,000 was recovered from sales, the cost to the exchequer being £50,000. Taking into account the grants to relief committees, public works and to the relief commission, the government expended £365,000 in grants and provided £368,000 in loans to meet the scarcity (1).

The final series within the collection RLFC4 contains reports by inspecting officers appointed by the OPW and responses from the constabulary and relief committees to circulars issued by and at the behest of the commission. The series includes responses by constables in every parish and sub-district nation wide to a circular issued by the Inspector-General of Constabulary, Colonel Duncan McGregor in May 1846, seeking the extent of land under potato cultivation in 1844, 1845 and 1846, the proportion let in conacre, and the alternate crops sown in the land, which would, under ordinary circumstances, have been planted with potatoes. The commission circularised relief committees in August 1846 with seventeen questions about their activities including: the total amount of relief subscriptions received; the amount of donations from government and other sources, such as the Calcutta Relief Fund; the quantity and price of Indian meal purchased and resold, the number of individuals to whom Indian meal was sold weekly; the losses incurred by the committee; the numbers in receipt of direct relief; the numbers required to work for relief; the nature of relief work; the rate of payment on relief works; the expenditure on relief works; and the amount of monies and meal in hand. The series contains replies from Waterford, Clare, Laois, Offaly and Tipperary to the August 1846 circular. The OPW also appointed county inspecting officers to liaise with and report on the activities of relief committees and the series includes regular reports from November 1846 to March 1847 from the inspecting officers for Cork, Kerry, Galway, Limerick, Mayo, Tipperary, Westmeath and Wexford.

The papers of the Relief Commission are being entered on a database, which the National Archives will make available on CD-ROM and on the Internet in due course. The cause, extent and legacy of the Great Famine are still matters of some debate. It is hoped that the listing of the papers of the Relief Commission will contribute to a greater understanding of the calamity.

Note

R.D. Edwards, and T.D. Williams, (eds), *The Great Famine: studies in Irish History,* (New York, 1957), p 221.

Irish Archives

This article is an online version of the article 'Sources in the National Archives for researching the Great Famine: the Relief Commission Papers' by Marianne Cosgrave. The complete printed version with illustrative examples of the document types mentioned, appears in *Irish Archives,* the Journal of the Irish Society for Archives, Autumn 1995.