INTRODUCTION

The Great Famine which ravaged Ireland between 1845 and 1850 was one of the most destructive episodes in modern history. The death toll, in terms of numbers and per capita impact, rivalled those endured in recent decades in Biafra, Ethiopia and Sudan. Over a million perished, one in eight of those alive at its commencement. Ireland's population never regained its pre-Famine levels and the legacy of mass excess mortality, dislocation and forced emigration did little to reconcile the survivors to the perspective of the imperial power in London. The onset of blight was natural, but many blamed the Government for its incompetent response.

The fact that the victims perished within the comparatively developed economy of the United Kingdom was shocking and has proven controversial. Many Irish, yet very few Scots, died and this imbalance posed uncomfortable questions given that the potato-dependent poor of both countries were simultaneously affected by the scourge of blight in 1845-1846. The threatened populations of the Scottish Highlands received prompt and adequate government aid to forestall the worst effects of the food shortages. It has been argued that there was sufficient food in Ireland to feed those who died from starvation and exports of livestock and cereals to Britain certainly continued throughout the crisis. Counter-famine initiatives developed by the Government ranged in quality from inadequate to partially effective. This poor, if not disastrous, performance served to highlight the absence of the national parliament abolished by the Act of Union in 1800.

Outright starvation killed huge numbers in Ireland, as did an array of diseases that were deadly to the chronically malnourished; typhus, cholera and tuberculosis wrought havoc. Social displacement exacerbated the situation when refugees flocked to the overburdened workhouses and urban centres for relief. This often fatal secondary effect was all but inevitable given the inept manner in which the country's primitive form of social welfare was administered. Disease travelled with the afflicted, whose numbers were such as to make quarantine and effective medical treatment almost impossible. There was no uniform policy governing the allocation of relief to the uprooted poor and various efforts to co-ordinate emergency measures resulted in lethal 'starvation gaps'. Such failings were, at least, unintentional. The mass evictions of the later years of Famine, however, added exposure to the common causes of excess mortality. This required specific and personal human agency; bailiffs and constables were tasked to seize goods and evict tenants by landlords availing of legislation made in Westminster. None could claim innocence of the brutal consequences of dispossession.

Death was not indiscriminate: Ireland's garrisons, constabulary, landlords, civil servants and clergy did not perish from want in 1845-1850. At least a million died because they could not afford to pay for meals, particularly those formerly reliant on the potato diet. It appeared as if the state either could not or would not keep them alive. Allegations of callousness stemmed from the knowledge that Irish produce flowed unabated to the towns and cities of industrial Britain. Theoretical debates on trade balance, market forces and inflation rates lacked credibility to those facing starvation, or, indeed to the Irish officials who urged the retention of shipments to meet urgent domestic

requirements. Anomalies of this nature have inspired the Irish Famine Genocide Committee and others to contend that London exploited a natural crisis in pursuance of strategic political objectives. Denials based on purely economic determinants have proven decidedly unconvincing. Contemporary factors, such as British concepts of 'providence', 'moralism' and '*laissez-faire*' theory, as well as base anti-Irish hostility, permit suspicion that darker forces were at work. In 1997 Britain's Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair acknowledged: 'Those who governed in London at the time failed their people through standing by while a crop failure turned into a massive human tragedy'.[1]

Recent assessments of the Irish experience during the Famine years have produced compelling insights and increasingly view the event in its appropriate international context. While the fractured and tragic history of the Great Irish Famine awaits satisfactory analysis, this book examines the key events of the period. It explores the short- and long-term causes of the Famine, local and government responses to the crisis and the impact on Irish society.