THOMAS CARLYLE, CHARTISM, AND THE IRISH IN EARLY VICTORIAN ENGLAND

By Roger Swift

Crowds of miserable Irish darken all our towns.
—Chartism

Thus wrote Thomas Carlyle in his famous long pamphlet Chartism, published in December 1839. But what moved Carlyle, the intellectual hero of the age, to direct attention in Chartism to the Irish presence in the early Victorian city? Why did he present the Irish in England in such negative terms? Was his analysis correct? And what was the wider significance of his interpretation? These, as Carlyle might have said, are measurable questions and they form the essential framework of this paper. Yet it is impossible to respond to these questions without first examining the contemporary social, economic, and political contexts within which Chartism was written; Carlyle's development as an historian in the early 1830s; and the purpose of Chartism, including the chapter on the Irish entitled “The Finest Peasantry in the World.”

Chartism was written at the end of a decade when the social and economic consequences of industrialization and urbanization were not only becoming all too visible but were increasingly the subject of parliamentary and extra-parliamentary scrutiny and inquiry. The rapid growth of industry and the increasing concentration of an expanding population in industrial and manufacturing centers served to both exacerbate and magnify the depressed social condition of the working classes and to highlight the growing gulf between the rich and the poor. In particular, the social issues of poverty, crime, ignorance, low standards of public health and housing, and harsh working conditions provided the focus for an intellectual and political debate between those who argued that industrialization, supported by the political economy of laissez-faire, was a progressive development, the genesis of unbounded wealth and the mark of an advancing civilization, and those who held that it was essentially regressive, the harbinger of social disharmony and environmental decay, and the potential source for political conflict between the propertied and privileged sectors of society — bolstered by the political settlement enshrined in the Great Reform Act of 1832 — and the disenfranchised masses. The decade had commenced with rural unrest in the shape of the Swing riots of 1830 in the southern counties of England; yet by the late-1830s working-class discontent in the manufacturing districts, compounded
by the exclusion of the working classes from the 1832 settlement and the Benthamite-inspired class legislation (most notably the New Poor Law of 1834) of successive Whig governments, had found political expression in Chartism against the immediate backcloth of the worst economic depression of the nineteenth century. The Chartist movement, with its six-point manifesto for democratic reform, published in 1838 as The People’s Charter, represented a radical political response by working people to their condition, and it was the very nature of that condition, placed in its wider historical context, that Carlyle sought to address in his pamphlet of 1839.¹

Carlyle held a lifelong interest in history, which he regarded as the most profitable of all studies. This interest reflected Carlyle’s awareness of the mysteriousness of Time as the medium in which all human action occurs, hence his concern to recover the lost past and to make it live again, which he saw as a major responsibility of the historian and which owed much to Germanic influences, and particularly to Hegel. It also derived from Carlyle’s perception of history as Bible, as the revelation of a just providence working in human affairs; thus, by studying the chastisements visited upon erring societies in the past, existing societies can mend their ways in the present, and this providential view of history informed much of Carlyle’s historical writing in the 1830s (Le Quesne 39–41).² Moreover, as Peter Keating has observed, Carlyle’s preoccupation as an historian with the inter-connectedness of the past, the present, and the future within a continuum reflected one of the distinguishing characteristics of modern prophetic literature (18). In 1829 Carlyle published an important essay, “Signs of the Times,” in the Edinburgh Review (Poston 381–406). This essay, which was perhaps his first major contribution to the social thought of the day, had articulated a direct and critical response to the England of his times, to Industrialism, which he was the first to name, and to the quality of men’s reactions to what he defined as “the Age of Machinery, in every outward and inward sense of that word” (Carlyle, Works 233; vol. 2). In damning faith in mechanism, Carlyle had also pointed to the socially destructive and disorienting impact of Industrialism by altering old social relationships and increasing the distance between rich and poor (Williams, R. 72–75).

Indeed, by the late 1830s, the social condition of England had become his chief preoccupation. As Peter Keating observes, this was the period when his influence was at its strongest, for his gospel of work and fierce demands that the new industrial society should be studied and understood were important features of the early Victorian mood (43). In 1837 Carlyle published The French Revolution and the ideas it expressed contributed to his growing reputation as a social prophet. For Carlyle, the French Revolution was the central fact of modern history and represented a sentence of divine justice on a corrupt society; as such, it was a cause for hope rather than fear after 1815 when the Revolution and the ideas associated with it were anathema to the governing classes of Europe, including Britain. Carlyle argued that the horrors and violence of the Revolution, which he described graphically, were no more than the result of all that had gone before; judgements wreaked on a corrupt society in which rulers had abrogated their divinely ordained responsibilities to the ruled. Yet The French Revolution was also of obvious and ominous relevance to the social condition of England in the early 1830s, for the parallels between his description of the plight of the French poor in the years before 1789 in The French Revolution and the condition of the English working classes in the 1830s were self-evident. In short, Carlyle intended The French Revolution to serve in part as a great history lesson that the world was ruled in the last resort by a just providence,
a lesson that his fellow-countymen might learn and learn from before it was too late (Le Quesne 49–50).

A similar theme emerged in Chartism, which has generally been acknowledged as one of Carlyle’s supreme works: for Raymond Williams the pamphlet was a fine example of Carlyle’s developed method and convictions (71); Le Quesne has suggested that Chartism could be considered the best piece of social criticism that Carlyle ever wrote (54); whilst Simon Heffer has described Chartism as “the essence of Carlyle’s political thought, the clearest statement of his beliefs” (193). Carlyle began writing Chartism in August 1839, and completed it on November 8, noting in his Journal “I have just finished a long review article, thick pamphlet, or little volume, entitled ‘Chartism’” (qtd. in Froude 1: 183). The actual theme of the pamphlet is not Chartism itself, but the depth of human misery and suffering — the product of an increasingly godless and materialistic society — that had given rise to the movement. It begins by articulating contemporary anxieties in regard to the social condition of the masses:

A feeling very generally exists that the condition and disposition of the Working Classes is a rather ominous matter at present; that something ought to be said, something ought to be done, in regard to it. (165; ch. 1)

It then proceeds, with characteristic insight, to recognize Chartism as

the bitter discontent grown fierce and mad, the wrong condition therefore or the wrong disposition, of the Working Classes of England. It is a new name for a thing which has had many names, which will yet have many. The matter of Chartism is weighty, deep-rooted, far-extending. (166; ch. 1)

Then Carlyle poses the famous “Condition-of-England Question”:

What means this bitter discontent of the Working Classes? Whence comes it, whither it goes? Above all, at what price, on what terms, will it probably consent to depart from us and die into rest? These are measurable questions ... The condition of the great body of people in a country is the condition of the country itself ... Surely Honorable Members ought to speak of the “Condition-of-England Question” too? (170; ch. 1)

Hence for Carlyle, Chartism was the latest and most alarming manifestation of the “deep-lying struggle in the whole fabric of society,” the product of Industrialism, that he had identified previously in “Signs of the Times.” Indeed, in describing the discontent and disorder manifest in Chartism as “our French Revolution,” Carlyle not only articulated a sense that the material degradation of large masses of the population was morally offensive, but also presented an apocalyptic vision of the future — that if the economic and social consequences of industrialization were allowed to proceed without amelioration, catastrophic social unrest and communal violence would result (Supple 50).

Thus Chartism presented both a radical and incisive critique of the impact of industrial capitalism on contemporary society and a savage indictment of the ruling class for allowing such human suffering to materialize. For Carlyle, the moral and physical well-being — the cultural health — of society was the responsibility of the ruling class (in
England, aristocratic government), and its prime duty was to provide sufficient work for the masses to do; in turn, the ruling class was responsible to the divine justice that presided over the social order. In Chartism Carlyle held that the English ruling classes had abrogated such responsibilities and that their dereliction of duty had contributed to the emergence of the Chartism movement; here, Carlyle’s belief in providential justice working itself out in history is evident — it was mis-government that lay at the root of social distress and discontent. Moreover, he argued that this failure of government was the product of the domination of the public conscience by Benthamite Utilitarianism, a philosophy that he abhorred. In November 1839 Carlyle had observed that “no sect in our day has made a wretcheder figure than the Bentham Radical sect” (qtd. in Froude 1: 183). Indeed, he held that the practical application of Benthamism had reduced human emotions and relationships to measurable quantities and mechanical interactions based on calculations of profit and loss — “the cash-nexus” — and had replaced spiritual and social obligations by economic and financial ones (Heffer 194).

Chartism thus presented a moral indictment of industrialization and its social consequences. Heffer describes it as “a belated, and hopeless, cry against the industrial revolution” (194), yet it was a cry that not only subsequently informed, via Charles Kingsley, the theoretical foundations of Christian Socialism (Amigoni 72–73), but also provided a significant critique of capitalist society that was acknowledged by Karl Marx (Le Quesne 72). As such, the pamphlet not only focused attention on the problems of the poor but also contributed to an intellectual and political debate during the 1840s among the educated and/or propertied classes within which the phrases “Condition-of-England Question” and “cash-nexus” became commonplace. Carlyle’s demand was for rational inquiry, for these were measurable questions to which the proliferation of Statistical Societies had failed to respond effectively, and he saw the failure of the legislature to seek such evidence as a symptom of the spirit of laissez-faire. Hence Carlyle’s call was for more government, not less; more order, not less. Later he was to call to the classes with power — the middle classes, “the Captains of Industry” — to purge themselves of what he termed “Donothingism” and make themselves an active and responsible governing class who would transform the social and human relationships hitherto dictated by the laws of political economy (Williams, R. 71–83).

This said, while Carlyle shared the Chartists’ concern over the “Condition-of-England Question,” he vehemently opposed their prescription, for he had little sympathy with the struggle for democracy inherent in the movement (Himmelfarb 199). Prior to the publication of Chartism he had been widely regarded as an extreme radical and many of his earlier writings had appeared in Whig or Radical journals. But the contents of Chartism reflected his rejection of the democratic forms of radicalism; indeed, as a realist, Carlyle saw democracy as an unpractical system, a Utopian creed which had already (as in the French Revolution) failed the test of history (Le Quesne 58). Moreover, the record of the reformed Parliament since 1832 provided him with little evidence for believing that a further extension of the franchise (universal male suffrage being the pre-eminent Chartist demand) would provide the solution to contemporary social problems. Indeed, Carlyle held that it had been the failure of the reformed Parliament and its elected representatives to both address and discover the root causes of distress that had given rise to Chartism. In his later writings, in his search for stability in a sea of change, Carlyle increasingly moved to an alternative solution based on heroic leadership and reverent obedience, as reflected in Heroes
and Hero-Worship (1841), Past and Present (1843), Oliver Cromwell’s Letters and Speeches (1845), Latter Day Pamphlets (1850), and Frederick the Great (1865). By the time of Shooting Niagara: And After? (1867) Carlyle had become utterly contemptuous of the masses, whom he described as a “Swarmery” who were characterized chiefly by “‘blockheadism, gullibility, bribeability, amenability to beer and balderdash’” (qtd. in Williams, R. 84).

Chartism was stronger on destructive than constructive criticism and Carlyle’s prescriptions were uncertain. In particular, Carlyle believed that the solution to the nation’s ills could be achieved by programs of state-promoted popular education and the planned emigration of surplus working people. The emphasis on the former, to promote culture (which he defined as the first duty of government), reflects Carlyle’s belief that society was composed of much more than economic relationships with cash payment as the sole nexus (which was the root of his attack on industrialism), whilst the latter owed much to Malthusianism. His apocalyptic vision also proved unjustified, for the 1850s gave way to relative social calm. Nevertheless, Chartism changed public perceptions of Carlyle: 850 copies of the pamphlet were quickly sold and a second edition prepared and, as Carlyle had forecast, “‘[s]uch an article, equally astonishing to Girondins, Radicals, do-nothing Aristocrats, Conservatives, and unbelieving dilettante Whigs, can hope for no harbour in any Review’” (qtd. in Froude 1: 183).

The chapter entitled “The Finest Peasantry in the World” deals exclusively with England’s relationship with Ireland and the socio-economic consequences of Irish immigration on English society. For Carlyle, Ireland offered an historical case study, an exemplar, of the consequences of English misgovernance. Carlyle begins by referring to the scale of poverty in Ireland:

There is one fact which Statistic Science has communicated, and a most astonishing one; the inference from which is pregnant to this matter. Ireland has near seven millions of working people, the third unit of whom, it appears by Statistic Science, has not for thirty weeks as many third-rate potatoes as will suffice him. (180; ch. 4)

He then goes on to blame British misgovernment for creating starvation in Ireland:

We English pay, even now, the bitter smart of long centuries of injustice to our neighbour Island. Injustice, doubt it not, abounds; or Ireland would not be miserable. (182; ch. 4)

But he goes further:

England is guilty towards Ireland; and reaps at last, in full measure, the fruit of fifteen generations of wrong doing. (182; ch. 4)

Here again we have an illustration of Carlyle’s belief in providential justice working itself out in history, for the consequence of British misgovernment in Ireland had been the arrival in England during the 1830s of an increasing number of Irish poor who, unable to survive in their own country, sought work in England, undercutting wages and contributing to unemployment which, in turn, contributed to popular discontent in the form of Chartist. Thus, for Carlyle, the growing presence of the Irish poor in early Victorian England was England’s punishment for her mistreatment of Ireland.
Then, in perhaps the most famous and much-quoted passage from the chapter, Carlyle describes the moral and physical condition of the Irish in England:

Crowds of miserable Irish darken all our towns. The wild Milesian features, looking false ingenuity, restlessness, unreason, misery and mockery, salute you on all highways and byways. The English coachman, as he whirls past, lashes the Milesian with his whip, curses him with his tongue; the Milesian is holding out his hat to beg. He is the sorest evil this country has to strive with. In his rags and laughing savagery, he is there to undertake all work that can be done by mere strength of hand and back; for wages that will purchase him potatoes. He needs only salt for condiment; he lodges to his mind in any pighutch or doghutch, roosts in outhouses; and wears a suit of tatters, the getting off and on of which is said to be a difficult operation, transacted only in festivals and the hightides of the calendar. The Saxon man if he cannot work on these terms, finds no work. He too may be ignorant; but he has not sunk from decent manhood to squalid apehood; he cannot continue there . . . There abides he, in his squalor and unreason, in his falsity and drunken violence, as the ready-made nucleus of degradation and disorder. (182-83; ch. 4)

Here the poverty-stricken Irish are clearly presented as a blight on contemporary urban society, swarming into towns and cities with their uncivilized ways and exacerbating the “Condition-of-England Question.” The Irish character is impugned in the most vitriolic terms and the Irish are presented, as inferior beings within a wholly negative stereotype, as a threat not only to social order and stability but also to the very fabric of society. All this “is lamentable to look upon,” says Carlyle, but he acknowledges that it is not the fault of “these poor Celtiberian Irish brothers” who “cannot stay at home, and starve”; it is natural that they migrate. But their arrival in England represents “a curse,” a punishment for English mistreatment of Ireland in the past, which Carlyle then seeks to explain by placing the impact of Irish immigration into a wider social and economic context:

That the condition of the lower multitude of English labourers approximates more and more to that of the Irish competing with them in all markets; that whatsoever labour, to which mere strength with little skill will suffice, is to be done, will be done, not at the English price, but at an approximation to the Irish price; at a price superior as yet to the Irish, that is, superior to scarcity of third-rate potatoes for thirty weeks yearly; superior, yet hourly, with the arrival of every new steamboat, sinking nearer to an equality with that. (184; ch. 4)

So here we have Irish competition in the labor market undercutting English wages, with its inevitable impact on the scale of English unemployment, poverty, living standards, and discontent.

It should be noted from the outset that Carlyle’s explanation for Irish emigration, the negative stereotype of the Irish character that he presented, and the deteriorationist consequences of Irish immigration on the English economy and the standard of living of English workers were neither original nor unique. Similar observations had already been made by Dr. James Phillips Kay in his pamphlet of 1832, The Moral and Physical Condition of the Working Classes Employed in the Cotton Manufacture in Manchester, which argued that the Irish, with their debased peasant ways and their ability to survive on the bare minimum required for existence, taught the English working class a “pernicious lesson,” bringing down living standards wherever they settled (Kay 20). Four years later,
echoes of Kay’s views emerged in *The Report of the Royal Commission on the State of the Irish Poor in Great Britain* (1836), which sought in part to examine the extent to which Irish immigrants exercised a negative influence on the English and Scotch working classes by lowering their wages and debasing their moral character. The architect of the report, Sir George Cornewall Lewis, ultimately endorsed the views of many employers by emphasizing the economic value of Irish immigrant labor:

We ought not, however, to overlook 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; it is to be remembered that these Irish have been, and are, most efficient workmen; and 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. (456–57)

Yet much of the evidence presented by middle-class observers to *The Report on the State of the Irish Poor in Great Britain* also presented the Irish as uniformly poverty-stricken, dirty, unthrift, dissolute, and criminal, and Cornewall Lewis acknowledged that in consequence of their social condition, the Irish were not only extremely unpopular in those towns where they settled but also served to provide “an example of a less civilized population spreading themselves, as a kind of substratum, beneath a more civilized community” (457).

The work of Kay and Cornewall Lewis illustrates that anti-Irish stereotypes were well-entrenched prior to the publication of *Chartism* and, indeed, informed Carlyle’s analysis of the Irish in England. Moreover, Kay and Cornewall Lewis not only provided a forum for deep-rooted anti-Irish antagonisms to surface during the 1830s but also helped to initiate an historiographical tradition which presented an overtly negative image of Irish immigrants as the outcasts of contemporary society (MacRaild 67–85). That Carlyle made a powerful and influential contribution to the development of this genre is without question, for his analysis of the Irish in *Chartism* clearly informed the subsequent and equally negative portrayal of the Irish by Frederick Engels, in *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (Engels 123–26), although, unlike Carlyle, Engels did not influence the contemporary debate on Irish immigration, for his seminal work was not translated into English until 1886. It also influenced Angus Reach, in his reports on the Irish in the north of England for the *Morning Chronicle* in 1849 (MacRaild 78–81).

Perry Curtis Jr., an American historian, has argued that these examples of anti-Irish prejudice, articulated as they were by representatives of the Victorian intelligensia, including Carlyle, were essentially racist because they were based on the assumption that the native Irish were inferior in culture and alien in race to the Anglo-Saxons, an assumption that also underpinned simianized representations of the Irish in Victorian cartoons, most notably in *Punch* (Curtis 29–57). This thesis has been challenged by several historians, most notably Sheridan Gilley, who has argued that the British stereotype of “Paddy” had a benign as well as a menacing face and was as much an Irish creation as a British one. Hence, whilst the Irish were held, on the one hand, to be feckless, stupid, violent, unreliable and drunken, they were also perceived, on the other, as chaste, hospitable, witty, kindly and generous. Gilley has also suggested that there were understandable contemporary social and economic reasons for much of the hostility shown towards the Irish, reasons which do not in themselves justify the term “racial prejudice” (“English Attitudes” 81–110).
Clearly, the anti-Celtic stereotype was a complex one. Victorian racial theory was in the form of the claim that the English were superior as a mixed race, not as a pure one, to the Celts; hence the best mongrel English had the good Celtic qualities as well as the good Anglo-Saxon ones. In this context, the extent to which Anglo-Saxonism, a product of the Victorian intelligentsia, informed popular perceptions of the Irish and influenced the activities of anti-Irish disorders in English cities remains obscure. Moreover, anti-Celtism does not appear to have impeded the advancement of the small Irish Catholic middle-class in Victorian Britain, and it is possible that the prejudice which undoubtedly manifested itself was one essentially focused on Irish paupers, as a parallel with the more negative attitudes towards the English poor. Yet, as Roy Foster has observed, Celticism was an ambiguous concept during the Victorian period and many who might, at first sight, have seemed anti-Celtic also valued the Celtic contribution to what was perceived to be the British identity (193). On the other hand, there was an almost universal tendency from the 1840s onwards to describe the immigrant Irish in distinctly racial terms, terms which have retained their use into more recent times.

Yet there were other deep-seated reasons for anti-Irish prejudice in English society. In matters of religion, Irish immigrants were largely Roman Catholic whereas the English, Scots, and Welsh were overwhelmingly Protestant by tradition. After 1790 the strength of popular Protestantism was greatly reinforced by the Evangelical Revival, whilst Protestant “No Popery” also gained an increasing ascendency over the established Church of Ireland and Ulster immigrants of the Orange Order introduced their fratricidal strife with Irish Catholics into a number of British cities, notably Liverpool, where sectarian competition for jobs in a weakly-unionized economy polarized local politics between the Orange and the Green. Religion proved subsequently to be a vital ingredient in determining Anglo-Irish relations on a local level, particularly during the mid-Victorian period. The terms “Irish” and “Catholic” were virtually synonymous in British eyes and although anti-Irish sentiment was more diffuse than anti-Catholicism, it is evident that the resurgence of popular Protestantism in the wake of the Tractarian controversy of the 1840s and the re-establishment of the Roman Catholic hierarchy in 1850 provided an additional cutting-edge to Anglo-Irish tensions and contributed to the serious clashes between the English and the Irish during the period. Yet whilst the Catholicism of the Irish may well have contributed to their isolation, they were not more outcast as Catholics than English or foreign Catholics on the ground of their Catholicism alone. Catholicism was unpopular as a living ideological force and Victorian “No Popery” was much more than anti-Irishness: Celticism was regarded by Victorian liberals as foreign, exotic, and dangerous, the religion of Britain’s traditional enemies, France and Spain, the ally of reactionary governments and the creed of superstitious peasants everywhere. In this context, Carlyle’s strong Presbyterian upbringing in Scotland and his evident disdain of “Popery” undoubtedly colored his depiction of the Irish poor in Chartism.

Irish nationalism offered further grounds for British prejudice, in the tradition of Irish agrarian outrage and of the physical force resort to street violence and armed rebellion, or more impressively, the recourse to mass defiance. Yet the whole conception of the Irish as offering the outcast alternative in English radical politics requires the most sensitive statement. Certainly, the Irish nationalist Members of Parliament after 1829 formed an often discordant element in English political life; different aspects of the Irish question helped to defeat the Tory party in 1846; there was a significant Irish dimension to
Chartism, particularly during its later phases; and Irish agitation for the repeal of the Act of Union of 1800, spearheaded by Daniel O’Connell — “The Irish Liberator” — during the 1830s and early 1840s, did seem to many Englishmen to threaten the destruction of the empire at its very heart. Moreover, the disorders in Ireland associated with the activities of the repeal movement, coupled with O’Connell’s support in Parliament for the Whigs during the 1830s, provided an additional political sub-text for Chartism, for Carlyle supported the Union as vehemently as he opposed the Whigs. Yet there is also evidence to suggest that the actual Irish threat to the empire was greatly exaggerated and that the vast majority of Irish Catholic immigrants and their children were loyal if not always enthusiastic subjects of the Crown in England, Scotland, and Wales.6

That anti-Irish prejudice was an odd compound of religious, social and political elements, both rational and irrational, is indisputable, but during the early Victorian period in particular, it served to increase the isolation of the Irish poor, who were variously perceived in Carlylean terms as a nuisance, a threat, or a contagion. Outcast from British capitalism as the poorest of the poor, from mainstream British politics as separatist nationalists and republicans, from the “Anglo-Saxon” race as “Celts,” and as Catholics from the dominant forms of British Protestantism, the Irish were presented as the outsiders of contemporary society on the basis of class, nationality, race, and religion, a people set apart, rejected and despised. In this context, Carlyle’s references to the Irish in Chartism merely served to confirm what was already widely held to be the case — that Irish immigration was a social evil that highlighted basic differences between the English and the Irish — although they also represented a powerful, even infamous, contribution to an historiographical tradition that subsequently exercised an enormous influence on the historical study of the Irish in Britain.

Yet it is also important to acknowledge that recent research has virtually demolished many of the assumptions inherent in the Carlylean analysis. First, the causes of Irish migration to England during the period have been the subject of considerable historical debate. The classic explanation, voiced by Carlyle and others, held that Irish emigration was largely the consequence of a mounting Irish economic crisis of Malthusian dimensions, whereby a backward agrarian economy was increasingly unable to support a population that had virtually doubled between 1760 and 1840. Central to this argument was the belief that Ireland’s agrarian problems were the product of feudal tenurial arrangements and an abundance of discontented laborers and petty farmers, who kept wages low and prevented Irish landlords and British investors from modernizing agriculture and making it profitable. Similarly, overpopulation was regarded as the product of Catholic improvidence. Hence poverty, death, and distress, which reached their peak during the Great Famine of 1845–52, were regarded as the inevitable outcome of Ireland’s backwardness and mass emigration as the only escape from famine and destitution. However, this explanation appears increasingly inadequate in the light of recent research which has shed doubt on the whole concept of a mounting Irish economic crisis (ÓGráda 12–38) and has sought to explain the complex causes of pre-Famine Irish emigration in terms of the interaction of a combination of social and economic factors, some “pushing” the Irish out of Ireland, others “pulling” them from Ireland (Fitzpatrick 26–29; Miller, Emigrants 267–80). Moreover, emigration was becoming an increasingly feasible proposition, due largely to the improvement in communications between Ireland and Britain; hence for those who could afford it, emigration was be-
coming relatively easy and inexpensive. Of course, in the last resort, people had to want to leave Ireland, and during the pre-Famine period it was essentially those with the resources, the will, the information and the aspiration to move who sought a new life abroad (Holmes 22).

Second, the Irish were not crowding British cities during the 1830s to the degree that Carlyle implied. Certainly Irish immigration was increasing: in 1831 the number of Irish-born in Britain totaled about 290,000; by 1841, this had increased to 415,725, with 289,404 in England and Wales and 126,321 in Scotland. But the scale of Irish immigration was much greater during the 1840s — the Famine decade — than the 1830s. During this period, the Irish-born population of Britain virtually doubled, with 727,326 Irish-born in Britain by 1851, comprising 519,959 in England and Wales and 207,367 in Scotland. Moreover, even during the 1830s, the Irish-born population of English towns was not evenly distributed: while there were large concentrations in Liverpool, Manchester, and other Lancashire towns, and in London, there were smaller and relatively insignificant numbers in other towns and cities. And even in 1841, two years after Chartism had been published, the Irish-born comprised only 1.8% of the total population of England and Wales (Jackson 11).

Third, the Irish people who migrated to England during this period were by no means an homogeneous group of “miserable Irish,” for their ranks contained both rich and poor, skilled and unskilled, Catholics and Protestants (and unbelievers), Nationalists and Loyalists, and men and women from a variety of distinctive provincial cultures in Ireland. Neither were they all uniformly poor, although poor Irish Catholics were the largest and most visible group of emigrants, and their experience bulked large in the story of Irish migration, and, as David Fitzpatrick has suggested, “to alien eyes and ears it often mattered little whether an Irish emigrant was from Dublin or Mayo, a Protestant or a Catholic, a laborer or an artisan, a parent or on the loose. To their great indignation, the Irish overseas tended to be lumped together as ignorant, dirty and primitive Paddies or Biddies” (13). Yet by mid-century, the ranks of the Irish in England also included a small middle-class world of professional men, doctors, lawyers, soldiers, shopkeepers, merchants, and journalists (Edwards and Storey 158–78).

Fourth, in addressing Carlyle’s claim that Irish immigrants “darken all our towns,” there is further cause for debate, although it is difficult to strike a proper mean between the lighter and darker sides of the Irish urban experience, which differed from one settlement to another. Much contemporary qualitative evidence, including Chartism, suggested that the newcomers were located in socially immobile and unintegrated ghettos, popularly described as “Little Irelands,” which were isolated in particular streets and courts from the surrounding populations. However, historians have increasingly rejected the concept of Irish ghettoization as little more than a myth, suggesting that the Irish did not congregate in ghettos to the exclusion of other ethnic groups. Indeed, the quantitative analysis of contemporary census data by social geographers and historical demographers has recently engendered a lively argument on the subject. For example, studies of Irish settlement in London, York, Liverpool, Blackburn, and Bolton suggest that while there were areas of concentrated Irish settlement the Irish were not wholly isolated from the host community, and even where Irish immigrants dominated particular streets, courts, and squares they were seldom shut off from the native population and that the Irish lived cheek by jowl besides natives of the same social class. In short, the poor Irish lived among
the English poor, and the upwardly mobile among the English upper-working or middle class.

Admittedly, poverty, the most obvious of the immigrant’s disadvantages, was a driving force of Irish emigration, and in many respects the Irish experience in England was unique, for in their flight from poverty and misery in Ireland they found themselves in the towns and cities of the very country many blamed for their misfortune. As M. A. G. Ó’Tuathaigh has observed,

Their living conditions were generally the very worst which the Victorian slum could offer and displayed the full spectrum of social evils: appalling overcrowding, little or no sanitation, open sewers and cesspools, unhealthy diet, inadequate clothing, vagrancy, disease, alcoholism and general squalor, a high quota of unemployed paupers or of underemployed casual labourers, and a high incidence of casual violence. (154)

These were the conditions which attracted the attention of early-Victorian social investigators and, for some, including Carlyle, the influx of poverty-stricken Irish men, women, and children was regarded as little short of a social disaster which, it was held, exacerbated urban squalor, constituted a health hazard, and increased the burden on the poor rates, whilst Irish fertility rates aroused fears of racial deterioration.9

Yet such fears need also to be understood in the context of the many contemporary issues — urban squalor, disease, disorder, vagrancy, and unemployment — with which they became entangled, and, in a sense, it was a tragic coincidence that the growing awareness of acute urban problems during the 1830s and 1840s, reflected in the “Condition-of-England Question” which Carlyle defined, occurred at the same time as the rising tide of Irish immigration. Against this background, the Irish became an easy target and the poor Irish, who were the only visible Irish, became convenient scapegoats for environmental deterioration. Yet the plethora of urban social problems was clearly not the product of Irish immigration: these conditions had existed long before the pronounced influx of the late 1840s, which in practice served only to magnify and exacerbate them. Furthermore, although the Irish were widely perceived to be a burden on the poor rates, even in 1847, the worst year of the Great Famine, when tens of thousands of destitute Irish men, women, and children fled to English towns, only two percent of gross expenditure on poor relief in England and Wales was expended on Irish paupers (Neal, Black 260–76). Similarly, recent studies of Irish employment patterns in Bristol and York have suggested that, at least before 1860 and the relaxation of the settlement provisions of the 1834 poor law, the Irish made a much smaller demand on public and private charity than their poverty and English prejudice might lead one to suppose (Large 37–58; Finnegan 110–18).

And were the “Wild Milesians” really “the ready-made nucleus of degradation and disorder” (Carlyle, Chartism 182–83; ch. 4)? True, it was widely held that Irish immigrants were the harbingers of crime and disorder, the ancillaries of urban poverty and environmental deterioration. Indeed, whilst crime and disorder had long been regarded as Irish traits, it was also held that the Irish were more criminal than other sections of British society and, as such, represented a challenge on the part of the dangerous classes, in which the Irish bulked large, to authority and order in nineteenth-century Britain. Statistical evidence suggests that the Irish-born were almost three times as likely to face prosecution
than their English neighbors and more than five times as likely to be convicted and imprisoned. Yet even here some important qualifications should be made. First, there is a wealth of evidence to suggest that Irish criminality was overwhelmingly concentrated in less-serious or petty categories. In general, the Irish were not noted for crimes of great violence. Second, the evidence suggests that the Irish were not over represented in all categories of petty crime, but that Irish criminality was highly concentrated in the often interrelated categories of drunkenness, disorderly behavior, and assault (including assaults on the police) and, to a lesser extent, petty theft, and vagrancy. Moreover, many of the so-called “Irish disorders” which so concerned contemporary opinion were in practice “anti-Irish disorders,” where Irish involvement was clearly defensive rather than offensive. It is also important to recognize that the stereotype of the brutalized “Paddy” was well-entrenched in the public mind; hence so-called “Irish districts” were expected to be hotbeds of crime and disorder, and anti-social behavior by the Irish merely confirmed preconceived notions regarding the irresponsibility and criminality of the Celt. It also, of course, influenced the attitudes of police and magistrates in their attempts to combat urban crime and disorder (Swift, “Crime” 217–33; Neal, “A Criminal” 161–99).

This said, Carlyle’s fear of disorder and of mob violence evident in Chartism, whether fomented by the Irish or the non-Irish, echoed a more generally held fear of the educated middle classes, noted by R. Williams (87–109), which formed an underlying theme in early Victorian fiction. Consider, for example, the initiation of Dandy Mick into a trade union in Disraeli’s Sybil (1845); the fortunes of John Barton in Elizabeth Gaskell’s Mary Barton (1848); the experiences of Alton Locke in Kingsley’s Alton Locke, Tailor and Poet (1850); the representation of Slackbridge in Dickens’s Hard Times (1854); or the circumstances surrounding the arrest and imprisonment of the central character of George Eliot’s Felix Holt (1866).

This leaves us with the question of the extent to which the Irish threatened English living standards. The great majority of Irish immigrants, largely illiterate and unskilled, most certainly entered the lowliest and least healthy of urban occupations, unless they enlisted in the army, which was 30 percent Irish in the mid-Victorian period. Overall, among the country immigrants to British towns and cities, the Irish were generally the least prepared to succeed in their new environment, as the Report on the State of the Irish Poor in Great Britain illustrated. Yet the classic view, endorsed by Carlyle, that Irish immigrants provided a large pool of cheap labour at a time of rapid industrial expansion and therefore played a crucial role in retarding workers’ living standards, in contributing to rising inequality, and in fostering industrialization, has been challenged by historians. For example, E. H. Hunt has observed that the classic view presumed a labor shortage in industrial Britain, yet increasing Irish immigration occurred against the background of fears of the Malthusian trap, increased emigration from Britain, and native hostility to the importation of Irish labor which, it was feared, would reduce workers’ living standards by taking work, reducing wages and weakening trade unions. Moreover, Hunt argues that much of the heavy work on turnpikes, canals, docks, harbors and, to a lesser extent, railways, was achieved by native labor before Irish immigration was of much consequence, concluding that “the effect of Irish immigration upon the pace of British industrialization was therefore not great” (175). This thesis has been confirmed by a rigorous quantitative study by Jeffrey G. Williamson, who concludes that Irish labor did not play a significant role in accounting for rising inequality, lagging real wages, or rapid industrialization.
Indeed, Williamson suggests that Irish labor was, in general, “simply not crucial to the British Standard-of-Living Debate,” and that, although the Irish-born comprised 8.8 percent of the British labour force by 1861, their impact as a predominantly unskilled minority of workers on the British economy was a very small one (693–720). So here too, Carlyle’s analysis is again open to question.

Finally, it is worth noting Carlyle's general ambivalence towards the Irish. One illustration of this lies in the fact that the writer who spoke of English injustice towards Ireland in Chartism subsequently published, in 1845, Letters and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell, which was a eulogy to its subject, who emerged as a Protestant hero, visionary leader, and man of destiny (Gilmour 51). It included an approval of the massacres of Irish Catholics at Drogheda and Wexford during Cromwell’s suppression of the Irish rebellion, events which were presented as examples of the providential chastisement of a wilfully rebellious people. Another illustration (which is somewhat ironic, given Carlyle’s dislike of O’Connell and all that he represented) is provided by Carlyle’s friendship with John Mitchel and Charles Gavan Duffy, the leaders of the “Young Ireland” movement, whom he met during his first visit to Ireland in August 1846 (Froude I: 426–30), and whom he found sincere and idealistic even though he supported the Union and disapproved of the militant methods they advocated for its overthrow! (Carlyle, Letters 144). A third illustration is provided by Carlyle’s second visit to Ireland in the summer of 1849, at the height of the Famine and in the aftermath of the failed revolution of the Young Irelanders, in order to see “the problem lying visible” (Letters 71, 254). Here he found Irish workhouses to be “swineries” filled with “human swine,” remarking “Blacklead those two millions idle beggars . . . and sell them in Brazil as Niggers” (Letters 192). On his return to Scotland he commented “Thank heaven for the sight of real human industry, with human fruits from it, once more. The sight of fenced fields, weeded crops, and human creatures with whole clothes on their back — it was as if one had got into spring water out of dunghill puddles” (qtd. in Froude 2: 8).10

Although historical research has shed considerable doubt on the accuracy of Carlyle’s analysis of the Irish in early Victorian England, “The Finest Peasantry in the World” still constitutes a seminal source for the study of the subject. By providing a micro-study, an exemplar, of the themes explored in Chartism, Carlyle places the Irish in early-Victorian England firmly in their broader historical and contemporary contexts. Thus the plight of the Irish in England is presented as symptomatic both of England’s misgovernment of Ireland in the past and of the socio-economic consequences of Industrialism, Mechanism, and laissez-faire Utilitarianism. Moreover, although Carlyle’s analysis predated the Great Irish Famine of 1845–52 and its catastrophic consequences (when the condition of the Irish in England was undoubtedly far worse than it had been perceived to be during the 1830s), it also portended that Famine crisis, adding weight to Carlyle’s status as the prophet of the age. And of course in 1848, at the height of Famine, and in the year of European Revolutions, the Irish made a major contribution to the final phase of Chartism by providing a revolutionary cutting edge to a movement that, in essence, believed in securing political concessions from the state by constitutional rather than revolutionary means (Belchem, “English” 85–97; “Liverpool” 68–97). Yet the relative failure of Chartism in 1848, coupled with the subsequent improvement in the British economy and the success of the Great Exhibition of 1851, heralded the onset of a period of relative progress and stability in Victorian society, when the fires of discontent appeared burned out and the
threat of revolution checked. In this relatively tranquil and prosperous mid-Victorian context, much of what Carlyle had both feared and prophesied in Chartism had clearly not come to pass. Yet in the last analysis, whilst accepting that Carlyle's representations of the Irish in Chartism subsequently exercised a baneful influence on the historiography of the Irish in Britain, whether Carlyle was right or wrong is perhaps immaterial; of greater importance, in regard to both the "Condition-of-England Question" in general and the condition of the Irish in early-Victorian England in particular, is the fact that many contemporaries believed this to have been the case rather than the fact that it was not.

Chester College

NOTES

1. For social and economic conditions in England during the 1830s, see especially Hammond, Thompson, Finlayson, Inglis, Hobsbawm and Rude, Taylor, Roberts, Henriques.
2. For Carlyle's life and work, see especially Froude, The Collected Letters of Thomas and Jane Welsh Carlyle. See also Holloway, Seigel, Clubbe, Kaplan, Qualls, Rosenberg.
3. Note Curtis's recent defense of his thesis in "Historical Revisionism and Constructions of Paddy and Pat" in the revised edition of Apes and Angels 109-47. See also Eagan's recent review of Curtis. For alternative perspectives, see Douglas, Harte, and O'Hara.
5. For further details, see especially D. Miller; Connolly; Gilley, "The Catholic Faith of the Irish slums: London, 1840-70"; see also Gilley's "Vulgar piety and the Brompton Oratory, 1850-60"; and Samuel.
6. For further details, see especially Thompson, "Ireland and the Irish in English radicalism before 1850."
7. See, for example, Thompson, The Making of the English Working Class, Davis, Busteed, Hodgson, and Kennedy.
8. See, for example, Lees and Finnegan.
9. For a useful local study of the perceived link between the Irish presence and low standards of public health, see Coney. See also A. Williams. The extent to which Irish living conditions influenced the both the contemporary social policy debate and contemporary social reforms are discussed by Jones.
10. Carlyle's Reminiscences of My Irish Journey in 1849 was published in 1882, a year after Carlyle's death.
11. For the mid-Victorian years, see especially Burn and Hoppen.

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