# ASSISTED EMIGRATION AND THE MORAL DILEMMAS OF THE MID-VICTORIAN IMPERIAL STATE*

PHILIP HARLING

*University of Kentucky*

ABSTRACT. *This article examines three voyages of the late 1840s to advance the argument that emigration – often treated by its historians as 'spontaneous' – actually involved the* laissez-faire *mid-Victorian imperial state in significant projects of social engineering. The tale of the* Virginius *exemplifies that state's commitment to taking advantage of the Famine to convert the Irish countryside into an export economy of large-scale graziers. The tale of the* Earl Grey *exemplifies its commitment to transforming New South Wales into a conspicuously moral colony of free settlers. The tale of the* Arabian *exemplifies its commitment to saving plantation society in the British Caribbean from the twin threats posed by slave emancipation and free trade in sugar. These voyages also show how the British imperial state's involvement in immigration frequently immersed it in ethical controversy. Its strictly limited response to the Irish Famine contributed to mass death. Its modest effort to create better lives in Australia for a few thousand Irish orphans led to charges that it was dumping immoral paupers on its most promising colonies. Its eagerness to bolster sugar production in the West Indies put 'liberated' slaves in danger.*

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In August 1847, the *Virginius* completed her voyage from Liverpool to the quarantine station at Grosse Isle, some thirty miles up the St Lawrence from Québec City. Her 476 passengers were Irish peasants fleeing the Potato Famine; 158 of them had perished at sea, and another 109 at Grosse Isle, mostly from typhus.[1] In March 1848, the *Arabian* completed her voyage from Freetown, Sierra Leone, to Georgetown, British Guiana. Her 268 passengers were African slaves recently liberated by the Royal Navy who had opted to work as indentured servants in the Guyanese sugar plantations. Twenty-two of them had perished at

*University of Kentucky, Department of History, 1715 Patterson Office Tower, Lexington, Kentucky 40506–0027, USA* harling@uky.edu

[1] Christine Kinealy, *The great Irish Famine: impact, ideology and rebellion* (Basingstoke, 2002), p. 143; Gerard Moran, *Sending out Ireland's poor: assisted emigration to North America in the nineteenth century* (Dublin, 2004), pp. 48–54.

sea, and within a fortnight of landing seventeen more had died in hospital, with another twenty-nine lingering between life and death, mostly from dysentery.[2] In December 1848, the *Earl Grey* completed her voyage from Plymouth to Sydney. Her 217 passengers were Irish orphan girls, mostly between the ages of fourteen and eighteen. Two had perished en route. But the *Earl Grey*'s surgeon-superintendent, Dr Henry Douglas, alleged that fifty-six of the girls were of 'abandoned' character, and they were shipped at once to Maitland and to Moreton Bay in order to separate them from the rest of the girls before they, like the rest, were apprenticed to employers.[3]

These three voyages are superficially connected in the misfortune that plagued their passengers (though misfortune obviously turned into disaster in only the first two cases). Those passengers also had in common a prior victimhood. Some of the Irish girls on the *Earl Grey* had been orphaned by the Famine that the *Virginius* passengers were trying to escape,[4] while the health of the *Arabian*'s passengers had been deeply compromised by their prior ordeals in the holds of slave ships.

Another thing all these passengers had in common was that they were part of an unprecedented wave of emigrants on the move around the British empire at mid-century. This vast global movement of mostly poor British and British imperial subjects was a distinctive element of what we might call Victorian modernity and a new phenomenon much commented on at the time. Over the eighteenth century, a mere half million people emigrated from the British Isles; between 1815 and 1924, 24 million did.[5] It was the Famine of the late 1840s and early 1850s that put this emigration into high gear and, for a couple of decades, made it disproportionately Irish. While the passengers of the *Virginius* and the *Earl Grey* were in the Irish emigrant vanguard, those of the *Arabian* were in the vanguard of the 1·4 million indentured workers, virtually all of them brown or black, who were recruited from within the empire and sent to work in other British imperial possessions in the eighty years prior to 1920. What made the *Arabian*'s passengers somewhat exceptional is that they were African – 85 per cent of all indentured workers were from India.[6]

Yet another thing all these passengers had in common was that their emigration had been assisted in one way or another. The fares of the peasants aboard the *Virginius* had been paid by their landlord, Major Denis Mahon of Strokestown, County Roscommon, who was desperate to rid his lands of

[2] PP (*Parliamentary papers*) 1847–8 (399), pp. 174–5.
[3] Kinealy, *Great Irish Famine*, pp. 320–1; Gov. Sir C. A. Fitzroy to Earl Grey, 19 Dec. 1848, PP 1850 [1163], p. 1; Henry G. Douglas to Edward D. Thompson, 7 Oct. 1848, ibid., p. 3; Report of the Orphan Immigration Committee of New South Wales, 6 Dec. 1848, ibid., p. 3.
[4] Trevor McClaughlin, *Barefoot and pregnant? Irish Famine orphans in Australia* (2 vols., Melbourne, 1991 and 2001), II, p. 11.
[5] James Belich, *Replenishing the earth: the settler revolution and the rise of the Anglo-world, 1783–1939* (Oxford, 2009), p. 129.
[6] Marjory Harper and Stephen Constantine, *Migration and empire* (Oxford, 2010), pp. 150–1.

thousands of cottiers who were years behind in their rents. While Mahon thus helped several hundred of them to emigrate, he evicted over 3,000 more who refused his offer. The bitterness of those mass evictions led to his assassination just three months after the *Virginius*'s survivors landed in Québec.[7] The passages of the orphan girls aboard the *Earl Grey* had mostly been paid out of the New South Wales land fund, with limited assistance from the Irish Poor Law unions from which they had been selected. The costs of transporting the 'liberated' Africans across the Atlantic were defrayed directly by the British imperial government, as a sop to the Caribbean colonies that were in desperate need of immigrant labour to shore up their faltering sugar economies.

A final thing all these passengers had in common was that their status as 'assisted' emigrants was highly exceptional. The vast majority of emigrants had to rely solely on themselves, their families, and their friends to cover their transport expenses. In this basic sense, Eric Richards is right to affirm that the most important point about nineteenth-century emigration was 'its sheer spontaneity. It happened outside government control and beyond contemporary understanding. It was atomistic. Millions of people departed with astonishingly little framework or ideology.'[8] Nevertheless, I wish to argue here that the voyages of the *Virginius*, the *Earl Grey*, and the *Arabian* show that there was indeed an ideological framework to some of the major mid-century migrations, and that these migrations involved the *laissez-faire* mid-Victorian imperial state in significant projects of social engineering. The *Virginius* exemplifies that state's commitment to taking advantage of the Famine to convert the Irish countryside from a subsistence economy of peasants and potatoes to an export economy of large-scale graziers. The *Earl Grey* exemplifies its commitment to transforming New South Wales from a colony of convicts to a conspicuously moral colony of free settlers in which the ratio of women to men would be brought into virtuous equilibrium. The *Arabian* exemplifies its commitment to saving plantation society in the British Caribbean from the twin threats posed by slave emancipation and free trade in sugar. Finally, these voyages also show how the British imperial state's involvement in immigration frequently implicated it in serious ethical controversies. Its strictly limited response to the Irish Famine contributed to mass death. Its modest effort to create better lives in Australia for a few thousand Irish orphans led to charges that it was dumping immoral paupers on its most promising colonies. Its eagerness to bolster the sugar monoculture in the West Indies tarnished its anti-slavery credentials by privileging the planters' welfare over that of liberated slaves.

Social engineering was of course very frequently at work in Victorian emigration policy. This was dramatically the case in the white settler colonies,

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[7] Robert James Scally, *The end of hidden Ireland: rebellion, Famine, and emigration* (Oxford, 1995), ch. 3.

[8] Eric Richards, *Britannia's children: emigration from England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland since 1600* (London, 2004), p. 149.

predicated as they were on indigenous dispossession and on the establishment of a carful gender balance among settlers. What is particularly interesting about the very different migration streams exemplified in these three voyages is that they were fraught with moral dilemmas. Emigration policy provides but one of many instances in which the ostensibly moral foundations of the mid-Victorian state 'at home' led to dubious moral consequences within what John Darwin has dubbed the 'British world system'.[9] Those foundations were *laissez-faire* or a reluctance (albeit a reluctance often overcome) to interfere with property rights and market relations, 'cheap government', free trade, and 'good government', or rational standards of administrative efficiency and disinterestedness.[10] Each of these shibboleths, institutionalized within the Victorian state, carried a potent moral charge that was supposed to free the autonomous liberal subject from the oppressions of the unenlightened past – *laissez-faire* from misbegotten paternalism,[11] 'cheap government' from the hugely expensive and maldistributive late Georgian fiscal-military state,[12] free trade from a protectionist system that favoured narrow, privileged interests at the expense of everyone else,[13] and 'good government' from aristocratic jobbery and political favouritism.[14]

Each of these metropolitan shibboleths, however, generated troubling moral outcomes as they radiated around the British world system. As the fiscal-military state gave way to 'cheap government' at home, for instance, it was greatly built up in India, and the habitual use of Indian soldiers for imperial expansion and policing shifted much of the cost of empire from affluent British to very poor Indian taxpayers.[15] Free trade undermined the sugar economy of the British Caribbean,[16]

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[9] John Darwin, *The empire project: the rise and fall of the British world-system, 1830–1970* (Cambridge, 2009), p. ix.

[10] Philip Harling, *The waning of 'Old Corruption': the politics of economical reform in Britain, 1779–1846* (Oxford, 1996), p. 9.

[11] Most notably with respect to the Poor Law. See e.g. Lynn Hollen Lees, *The solidarities of strangers: the English Poor Laws and the people, 1700–1948* (Cambridge, 1998). For *laissez-faire* as a more general organizing principle, see Karl Polanyi, *The great transformation: the political and economic origins of our time* (Boston, MA, 1944).

[12] Philip Harling and Peter Mandler, 'From "fiscal-military" state to laissez-faire state, 1760–1850', *Journal of British Studies*, 32 (1993), pp. 44–70; Martin Daunton, *Trusting leviathan: the politics of taxation in Britain, 1799–1914* (Cambridge, 2001), chs. 1–3.

[13] Anthony Howe, *Free trade and liberal England, 1846–1946* (Oxford, 1997); Frank Trentmann, *Free trade nation: commerce, consumption, and civil society in modern Britain* (Oxford, 2008).

[14] Sir Norman Chester, *The English administrative system, 1780–1870* (Oxford, 1981); J. M. Bourne, *Patronage and society in nineteenth-century England* (London, 1986).

[15] Douglas M. Peers, *Between Mars and Mammon: colonial armies and the garrison state in India, 1819–1835* (London, 1995); idem, 'State, power, and colonialism', in Douglas M. Peers and Nandini Gooptu, eds., *India and the British empire* (Oxford, 2012), 30–42; David Omissi, *The sepoy and the raj: the Indian army, 1860–1940* (Basingstoke, 1994); Thomas R. Metcalf, *Imperial connections: India in the Indian Ocean arena, 1860–1920* (Berkeley, CA, 2007), ch. 3.

[16] Catherine Hall, *Civilising subjects: colony and metropole in the English imagination, 1830–1867* (Chicago, IL, 2002), ch. 6; Thomas C. Holt, *The problem of freedom: race, labor, and politics in Jamaica and Britain, 1832–1938* (Baltimore, MD, 1992).

exacerbated devastating Famines in Ireland in the 1840s and India in the 1870s and 1890s,[17] and became the chief rationale for two particularly sordid wars with China that were (paradoxically) fought in support of the Indian government's lucrative monopoly of the opium trade.[18] 'Good government' as translated into innumerable colonial settings meant rule by a small handful of white Britons over enormous numbers of brown and black people who were deemed unfit to govern themselves.[19] There is still much to be understood about how these foundational Victorian values became denatured and corrupted as they circulated around the 'British world'. In the emigration cases examined here, *laissez-faire* led to morally questionable consequences in very different corners of the globe at almost precisely the same time, whether *laissez-faire* was honoured in the breach or in the observance.

I

The Irish Potato Famine killed around a million people and forced another 2·1 million to emigrate between 1845 and 1855, roughly a quarter of Ireland's pre-Famine population and nearly a third of the population of the especially hard-hit western counties of Connaught.[20] Of this vast flow of people, only 6–8 per cent were assisted by Poor Law unions, private charitable organizations, or (as in the case of the ill-fated *Virginius*) landlords.[21] In the especially desperate months of 1847, well over 200,000 fled to North America. At least 30 per cent of Irish emigrants to Canada and 9 per cent to the United States that year perished in the attempt, overwhelmingly from typhus, dysentery, or relapsing fever.[22] Dysentery and fever combined to turn the *Virginius* into a prototypical 'coffin ship' of the 'Black '47' Famine emigration. 'Fever and dysentery

[17] Cormac Ó Gráda, *The great Irish Famine* (Dublin, 1989); idem, *Black '47 and beyond: the great Irish Famine in history, economy, and memory* (Princeton, NJ, 2000); Christine Kinealy, *This great calamity: the Irish Famine, 1845–1852* (Dublin, 1994); Cecil Woodham-Smith, *The great hunger: Ireland, 1845–1849* (New York, NY, 1962); Mike Davis, *Late Victorian holocausts: el niño famines and the making of the third world* (London, 2001); David Arnold, *Famine: social crisis and historical change* (Oxford, 1988).

[18] Julia Lovell, *The Opium War: drugs, dreams and the making of China* (London, 2011); James L. Hevia, *English lessons: the pedagogy of imperialism in nineteenth-century China* (Durham, NC, 2003); J.Y. Wong, *Deadly dreams: opium, imperialism, and the Arrow War (1856–1860) in China* (Cambridge, 1998); Carl A. Trocki, *Opium, empire and the global political economy* (Abingdon, 1999); John F. Richards, 'The opium industry in British India', in Sanjay Subrahmanyam, ed., *Land, politics, and trade in South Asia* (New Delhi, 2004).

[19] Thomas Metcalf, *Ideologies of the raj* (Cambridge, 1997), chs. 3–4; Eric Stokes, *The English utilitarians and India* (Oxford, 1959), pp. 239–69; Clive Dewey, *Anglo-Indian attitudes: the mind of the Indian Civil Service* (London, 1993).

[20] Kerby A. Miller, *Emigrants and exiles: Ireland and the Irish exodus to North America* (New York, NY, 1985), p. 291; Oliver MacDonagh, *A pattern of government growth, 1800–1860: the Passenger Acts and their enforcement* (London,1961), pp. 25–7.

[21] Tyler Anbinder, 'Lord Palmerston and the Irish Famine emigration', *Historical Journal*, 44 (2001), p. 445.

[22] Miller, *Emigrants and exiles*, pp. 292–3.

cases came on board this vessel in Liverpool', concluded G. M. Douglas, the medical superintendent at Grosse Isle, 'and deaths occurred before leaving the Mersey.' Among the 158 who had died en route to Québec were 'the first and second officers and seven of the crew'. Those who survived the nightmare voyage were 'ghastly yellow looking spectres, unshaven and hollow cheeked, and, without exception, the worst looking passengers' Douglas had ever seen – 'no more than six or eight were really healthy and able to exert themselves'.[23] It is true that mortality rates fell dramatically in subsequent years, largely thanks to a series of Passenger Acts that better regulated shipboard conditions.[24] But the consensus is that the 'coffin ship' emigration of 1847 is just one of many examples of how its response to the Famine showed the *laissez-faire* Victorian state at its worst.

Most serious scholars no longer subscribe to the old nationalist argument that the British government deliberately exacerbated the Famine.[25] There is general agreement, however, that the British response to it, initially robust, dramatically weakened as the Famine lingered. Early on, the British state sponsored emergency public-works schemes that employed some three-quarters of a million Irish, and soup kitchens that at the height of their operation fed some three million. But compassion fatigue rapidly set in as anti-Irish and anti-Catholic resentments grew, and Lord John Russell's government, dominated by moralistic proponents of *laissez-faire* and cheap government, made the disastrous decision in the summer of 1847 to foist almost the entire burden of Famine relief on the hopelessly overwhelmed Irish Poor Law system. The Poor Law Extension Act was a virtual death sentence for many thousands of cottiers, prompting hard-pressed landlords such as Major Mahon to reduce their now massive poor-rate obligations through wholesale evictions and poorly improvised emigration schemes. Thus, there is broad agreement that, in Joel Mokyr's words, 'when the chips were down…the British simply abandoned the Irish and let them perish'.[26]

Certainly, the British might have done a good deal more to aid Ireland in its plight. The treasury spent only £9·5 million on Famine relief, and most of this was in the form of loans. This outlay amounted to merely 2–3 per cent of public expenditure spread over the peak Famine years of 1846 through 1849.[27]

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[23] Extract from report of the medical examiner at Grosse Isle enclosed in earl of Elgin to 3rd Earl Grey, 8 Dec. 1847, PP 1847–8 [932], p. 5.

[24] See esp. MacDonagh, *A pattern of government growth*, pp. 7–8, 221, 326–7.

[25] See, classically, John Mitchel, *The last conquest of Ireland (perhaps)*, ed. Patrick Maume (Dublin, 2005). For analysis of the nationalist critique, see James S. Donnelly, Jr, *The Great Irish Potato Famine* (Stroud, 2001), pp. 18–22, 217.

[26] Joel Mokyr, *Why Ireland starved: a quantitative and analytical history of the Irish economy, 1800–1850* (London, 1985), p. 291. See also Kinealy, *Great Irish Famine*, p. 221; Donnelly, *Great Irish Potato Famine*, pp. 11–18; Woodham-Smith, *Great hunger*, pp. 407–8.

[27] Mokyr, *Why Ireland starved*, pp. 291–2; Ó Gráda, *Great Irish Famine*, 49; Donnelly, *Great Irish Potato Famine*, pp. 118–19; Peter Gray, *Famine, land and politics: British government and Irish society, 1843–1850* (Dublin, 1999), p. 333.

Cormac Ó Gráda estimates that it would have cost the imperial government an additional million to sponsor the assisted emigration of 100,000 destitute Famine victims, which in turn would have saved thousands of lives in Ireland itself,[28] while Gerard Moran notes that even more narrowly targeted assisted-emigration schemes would likely have substantially reduced the volume of forced evictions.[29] Russell and his colonial secretary, the 3rd Earl Grey, occasionally flirted with such schemes. But they were repeatedly beaten down by treasury opposition.[30] By August 1847, Grey himself was publicly embracing the Malthusian 'vacuum theory'[31] that 'any diminution of the population' of Ireland 'by artificial means', such as assisted emigration, 'would necessarily and inevitably be followed by an acceleration in the rate of increase of the population, which would more than meet the vacuum so occasioned', and that in any case 'some enormous grant of several millions of the public money for the advancement of emigration' would pose an unfair burden on British taxpayers.[32]

Russell's government saw no need to invest heavily in assisted emigration when the 'spontaneous' hemorrhage of poor Irish emigrants to North America was already doing enough to transform the Irish countryside from subsistence potato patch to high-profit pasture. To their minds, the miseries of the Famine had created a providential opportunity to eradicate the biggest obstacle to high-farming progress – an overgrown cottier class that eked out a miserable existence on rack-rented smallholdings.[33] Ireland was a better place now that there were nearly as many cattle as people living there, and as the number of smallholdings of five acres or less dramatically waned while fifteen-plus-acre farms dramatically waxed.[34] This happy transformation had come about at very little expense to the British taxpayer. By 1853, Grey could cheerily note that

the result of leaving emigration to proceed spontaneously, has…been to effect a transfer of population from one side of the Atlantic to the other, to an extent far beyond what could have been thought of, if it had been accomplished by the direct agency of the State; and at the same time avoiding the enormous expense

that government-funded emigration schemes would inevitably have entailed.[35] The imperial state might well have saved more Irish lives had it intervened more

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[28] Ó Gráda, *Great Irish Famine*, p. 48.

[29] Moran, *Sending out Ireland's poor*, pp. 89–90.

[30] Gray, *Famine, land, and politics*, pp. 279–308.

[31] See Klaus E. Knorr, *British colonial theories, 1570–1850* (Toronto, 1944), pp. 282–6, 297.

[32] *Speech of the Right Honourable Earl Grey, on emigration, August 10th, 1848* (London, 1848), p. 7.

[33] See esp. Gray, *Famine, land and politics*; R. D. Collison Black, *Economic thought and the Irish question, 1817–1870* (Cambridge, 1960), pp. 239–43.

[34] Paul Bew, *Ireland: the politics of enmity, 1789–2006* (Oxford, 2007), pp. 161, 250–1.

[35] 3rd Earl Grey, *The colonial policy of Lord John Russell's administration* (2 vols., London, 1853), I, pp. 244–5. See also the similar pronouncements of the imperial state's chief emigration stewards, the Colonial Land and Emigration Commission (CLEC): CLEC, 9th annual report, PP 1849 [1082], p. 1; CLEC, 11th annual report, PP 1851 [1383], p. 2; CLEC, 12th

dramatically and persistently to mitigate the effects of the Famine. But the moral imperative to save lives and assist emigration was at odds with the ideological imperative to facilitate through inaction the capitalist transformation of the Irish countryside along the accepted English lines of larger farms and landless wage workers.


## I I

A little over a year after the wretched survivors of the *Virginius* reached Québec, 217 Irish orphan girls disembarked at Sydney from the *Earl Grey* (named after the 2nd Earl Grey, the colonial secretary's father and the 'father' of the Great Reform Act). Their comparatively robust health after a three-month voyage from Plymouth was testament not merely to their youth, but to the ample provisions and careful medical attention they had received on board as beneficiaries of one of the very few emigration experiments supervised by the imperial state in the Famine years. They were among the first wave of the over 4,000 Irish orphan girls selected from 118 Irish Poor Law unions and shipped free of charge from Plymouth to New South Wales and South Australia between 1848 and 1850.[36]

Most of the *Earl Grey* girls were hired as domestic servants shortly after they disembarked in Sydney. But fifty-six of them from the Belfast Union had been separated out and made to leave the ship earlier – some at Maitland, others at Moreton Bay – because of the allegation of the ship's surgeon-superintendent, Henry Douglas, that they were violent and disorderly, petty thieves, liars, and whores. '[E]arly abandoned to the unrestricted gratification of their desires', Douglas alleged,

they have been left to conceive as erroneous an idea of the value of truths as they have of the necessity of personal restraint; and there are not wanting among them those who boast of the prolific issue of their vices. Expatriation has been held out to them as the reward of the workhouse; and the professed public woman, and the barefooted little country beggar have been alike sought after as fit persons to pass through the purification of the workhouse, ere they were sent as a valuable addition to the colonists of New South Wales.[37]

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annual report, PP 1852 [1499], p.14. By 1853, CLEC was beginning to worry that the rate of Irish emigration had so intensified that it 'could not be continued for many years without exhausting the native labouring classes'. CLEC, 14th annual report, PP 1852–53 [1647], 11.

[36] See esp. Kinealy, *Great Irish Famine*, pp. 315–27; McClaughlin, *Barefoot and pregnant?*; Robin F. Haines, *Emigration and the labouring poor: Australian recruitment in Britain and Ireland, 1831–1860* (Basingstoke, 1997), ch. 5; Paula Hamilton, 'The "servant class": poor female migration to Australia in the nineteenth century', and Janice Gothard, '"Pity the poor immigrant": assisted single female migration to colonial Australia', in Eric Richards, ed., *Poor Australian immigrants in the nineteenth century* (Canberra, 1991), pp. 99–101, 130–1; Paula Hamilton, '"Tipperarifying the moral atmosphere": Irish Catholic immigration and the state, 1840–1860', in Sydney Labour Group, *What rough beast? The state and social order in Australian history* (Sydney, 1982), esp. pp. 22–5.

[37] Henry G. Douglas to Edward Thompson, colonial secretary, New South Wales, 7 Oct. 1848, PP 1850 [1163], p. 2.

Investigating Douglas's claims, the Orphan Immigration Committee in Sydney issued the damning verdict that 'imposition has been practised upon the Commissioners, and…great injustice has been done to the colony in the selection of these 56 females'. '[T]heir violent and disorderly conduct on the voyage', the commissioners added, 'their habits of pilfering, and their grossly obscene and profane language, were such as to admit of no other conclusion than that they had mixed with the lowest grade of society, and that many of them had been common prostitutes'.[38]

In light of these findings, the Home Office told the Irish government to conduct its own investigation into how the *Earl Grey* orphans had been recruited. Dublin Castle ultimately admitted that 'the conduct of the emigrants upon their passage out to Australia was highly disorderly, that many of them were in the habit of using bad and disgraceful language, and that some at least amongst them were guilty of petty acts of theft'. But it hastened to add that 'few if any were in reality persons of depraved character'. Most were Belfast factory girls,

the effect of which is to expose them at an early age to the contamination of evil example and to familiarize them with the use of improper language. It would however…lead to a most unjust estimate of the character of the female population in manufacturing districts, if the use of even the worst language were taken as proof of immorality of conduct.[39]

The Belfast girls might have cursed like sailors, but this did not make them prostitutes.

The *Earl Grey* affair had a happy ending for the orphans. Even the fifty-six Belfast girls were quickly hired by colonists once they had been exonerated of any serious wrongdoing. There is evidence to suggest that most of them went on to better lives in New South Wales than they had led in the desperately overcrowded workhouses of Famine Ireland.[40] The affair also had a happy ending for the imperial government. The Irish orphan scheme was one of very few instances in which it supervised emigration as a means of relieving Irish distress, yet it paid virtually nothing for it. The Poor Law unions from whence the orphans came were obliged to pay a small fraction of their emigration costs – merely those needed to provide them with clothing for the voyage and to get them from Ireland to the embarkation depot in Plymouth. Some three-quarters of the roughly £20 per capita that had to be spent to get them from Ireland to the other side of the world was paid from the New South Wales and South Australia land funds,[41] just as it was for all other 'assisted' emigrants. The

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[38] PP 1850 [1163], p. 3.

[39] The National Archives (TNA), Colonial Office papers, 201/423, fos. 208–10.

[40] See McClaughlin, *Barefoot and pregnant?*, I, pp. ii–iii, 18–19. Unsurprisingly, there were also some tragedies. See Trevor McClaughlin, 'Exploited and abused: Irish orphan girls', in Rebecca Pelan, ed., *Irish-Australian studies: papers delivered at the seventh Irish-Australian conference, July 1993* (Sydney, 1993), pp. 161–6.

[41] CLEC, 9th annual report, PP 1849 [1082], p. 3.

principle of subsidizing emigrants' passages from the Australian land funds had been established as early as 1831 through the so-called Ripon Regulations, and since 1842 no less than half of those funds had been earmarked to emigration assistance. Of the 170,000 emigrants admitted to the Australian colonies between 1831 and 1851, some two-thirds of them had been assisted from the land funds.[42]

In the early years of assisted emigration, the Australian colonies had enjoyed significant control over the *kind* of colonists they recruited through a bounty system. But their control dramatically subsided in the years following the establishment of the Colonial Land and Emigration Commission (CLEC) in 1840. Like the Poor Law Commission, CLEC was a remarkably centralized Whig administrative body, headed by three commissioners, which quickly emerged as 'one of the most important agencies of government planning in the Victorian Age'. Over its thirty-year existence (and particularly from 1840 to the mid-1850s, when after the advent of responsible government the Australian colonies started running their own recruitment operations in Britain), CLEC was responsible for the recruitment of over 340,000 British and Irish emigrants, mostly to Australasia, and for arranging the details of their passage – all of this through its handling of nearly £5 million from colonial land sales.[43] Thus, as the commissioners themselves boasted, 'every detail connected with the removal of the emigrants, their passage, victualing, and accommodation, the selection of them at their own homes, and collection of them at the place of departure, has been either executed by, or carried out under the superintendence of, public authority'.[44]

Like the Australian colonial authorities with whom they worked, CLEC paid considerable deference to the principles of 'systematic colonization' most closely associated with Edward Gibbon Wakefield. Wakefield's principles were deeply embedded in the settlement of the Antipodes.[45] The first such principle was that, rather than being given away (as it had been in the early years in Australia), colonial land ought always to be sold. The second was that it should be sold at a 'sufficient price' – never clearly stated by Wakefield, but high enough to oblige emigrants of modest means to work for wages for at least a few years before they could afford to purchase any for themselves. The third was that, from the sale of lands, colonial governments should establish a fund from which emigration might be subsidized. The last principle was that

[42] K. S. Inglis, *The Australian colonists: an exploration of social history, 1788–1870* (Melbourne, 1974), pp. 16–17; John Gascoigne, *The Enlightenment and the origins of European Australia* (Cambridge, 2002), pp. 64–5; Donald Winch, *Classical political economy and colonies* (Cambridge, MA, 1965), ch. 8.

[43] Richards, *Britannia's children*, p. 136. For an institutional history of CLEC, see Fred H. Hitchins, *The colonial land and emigration commission* (Philadelphia, PA, 1931). For a compelling account of how its far-flung recruitment network operated, see Haines, *Emigration and the labouring poor*. For CLEC as a centralized Benthamite entity, see Winch, *Classical political economy*, pp. 149–50.

[44] CLEC, 7th annual report, PP 1847 [809], pp. 1–2.

[45] See e.g. Winch, *Classical political economy*, ch. 8.

the ideal emigrants to subsidize were able-bodied young couples of strong moral fibre who could help free Australia from the taint of its convict origins, and gradually counteract the depravity of a profoundly male frontier society. Thus, rather than a means of 'shoveling out paupers', as the radical MP Charles Buller (Wakefield's close political associate) memorably put it, assisted emigration was to be an exercise in virtuous social engineering, a means of seeding the Antipodes with upstanding strivers who were willing to work rather than squat. Obliged in most cases to work for wages in colonial towns and hamlets before they could purchase acres of their own, Wakefield's ideal emigrants would help to foster an English-style, town-based civil society rather than an American-style frontier philistinism.[46]

While CLEC was philosophically committed to Wakefieldian social engineering, however, by the late 1840s it found itself having more and more trouble finding the sort of emigrants that the colonies actually wanted. The emigrants in widespread demand in Australia were young women who already had experience as domestic servants and who might also provide suitable wives for pioneer farmers, and young men who already had experience as shepherds or farmworkers, or in the building trades. By 1847, that demand was almost insatiable, as the Australian colonies had just pulled out of a depression that had drained the land funds and had thus put assisted emigration on a two-year hiatus. But in a tightening labour market at home, it was increasingly difficult to lure experienced English workers to the other side of the world. It was especially hard to coax experienced female domestic servants to emigrate. This was a particular frustration to the Colonial Office, as Grey subscribed to the widely held view that the disproportion of the sexes continued to be a potent source of Australian depravity.[47] It was far easier to recruit qualified young men to emigrate. But if young women could not also be recruited in plentiful numbers, the gender imbalance would grow worse, and Australia might well revert to the polymorphous perversity of an overwhelmingly male society.

Convictism was only now coming to an end on the eastern Australian mainland.[48] But orphaned teenage girls desperate to escape Irish workhouses were not inclined to be too fastidious about Australia's recent convict past. Indeed, the chief reason the orphan emigration scheme was attractive to the Colonial Office was that it offered seemingly the only feasible way to accelerate *male* emigration without greatly magnifying an already dangerous imbalance between the sexes.[49] Some of the orphan girls were indeed Famine victims, but thus providing a modicum of Famine relief was a matter of only secondary

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[46] R. B. Madgwick, *Immigration into eastern Australia, 1788–1851* (2nd edn, Sydney, 1969), pp. 83–5; A. G. L. Shaw, ed., *Great Britain and the colonies, 1815–1865* (London, 1970), pp. 22–3, 78–9, 208.

[47] See e.g. Madgwick, *Immigration into eastern Australia*, pp. 191–7.

[48] See e.g. Philip Harling, 'The trouble with convicts: from transportation to penal servitude, 1840–1867', *Journal of British Studies*, 53 (2014), pp. 80–110.

[49] CLEC to Herman Merivale, 27 June 1848, PP 1847–8 [986], p. 111.

importance to CLEC, who chiefly saw the orphan scheme as a means to meet Australian emigration demand without exacerbating gender disparities.[50]

The imperial state's conundrum was that shipping out Irish orphans seemed the only feasible means of balancing emigration between the sexes. But shipping them out left the state open to the charge that it was making Australia a dumping-ground for paupers. The girls *were* paupers, of course, and had received virtually no training for domestic service in the desperately overcrowded Irish work-houses. The first shiploads of orphans were readily hired in Sydney, Melbourne, and Adelaide simply because at the time of their arrival there was an absence of better options. But over the next two years the colonial authorities repeatedly complained that the girls' lack of relevant work experience was making them less employable, especially since women from England and Scotland – few of them experienced domestic servants, but none of them Irish orphans – were finally beginning to arrive in greater numbers.[51]

The orphans' lack of experience had not been the only mark against them. So had the colonial suspicion that they were morally corrupt, a suspicion that of course largely stemmed from their poverty and their Irishness. In suggesting that a good many of the *Earl Grey* girls were not only foul-mouthed petty thieves but also prostitutes, Dr Douglas played on deep Australian anxieties. The largely false but widespread assumption was that the transportation of female convicts, which had accelerated over the 1830s, had launched a prosti-tute invasion of Australia.[52] Given this background, it is not surprising that similar anxieties revolved around poor, single young female emigrants. Colonial suspicions were rife that British authorities were using assisted emigra-tion as a means of giving young women who had already compromised their virtue at home a chance for a fresh start in Australia. Even if they had been above reproach before they boarded the emigrant ship, three or four months at sea in bad company was widely considered more than enough time to corrupt them by the time they disembarked.[53] CLEC, in partnership with the

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[50] 1st Report of the Select Committee of the House of Lords on Colonization from Ireland, testimony of Thomas Frederick Elliot, 9 Mar. 1848, PP 1847–8 (415), p. 59. See also Oliver MacDonagh, 'The Poor Law, emigration and the Irish question, 1830–1855', *Christus Rex*, 12 (1958), pp. 35–7; idem, 'Irish emigration to the United States of America and the British colonies during the Famine', in R. Dudley Edwards and T. Desmond Williams, eds., *The Great Famine: studies in Irish history, 1845–1852* (Dublin, 1956), pp. 352–9.

[51] Kinealy, *Great Irish Famine*, pp. 322–3; Madgwick, *Immigration into eastern Australia*, pp. 206–13.

[52] Stephen Nicholas and Peter R. Shergold, 'Unshackling the past', in Stephen Nicholas, ed., *Convict workers: reinterpreting Australia's past* (Melbourne, 1988), pp. 7–10; Deborah Oxley, 'Female convicts', in Nicholas, ed., *Convict workers*, pp. 85–97.

[53] Richard West Nash, *Stray suggestions on colonization* (London, 1849), p. 49. See also George Blakiston Wilkinson, *A letter to Lord Ashley on the necessity of an extended government plan of emigration to the Australian colonies* (London, 1848), p. 7. For the abiding fear of moral contamination on the voyage to Australia, and the steps that emigration authorities took to try to prevent it, see esp. Jan Gothard, *Blue China: single female migration to colonial Australia* (Melbourne, 2001), ch. 5; Robin Haines, *Doctors at sea: emigration voyages to colonial Australia* (Basingstoke, 2005), ch. 5.

Australian emigration authorities, feared moral infection enough to keep a sort of league table of emigrant ships in which the 'character of the emigrants' was either judged 'very satisfactory' or in which 'more or less dissatisfaction has been expressed with a portion of the emigrants'. The majority of ships elicited no negative comments. But a substantial minority did, and those comments fixated on female passengers. Among ships arriving in Sydney, for instance, the immigrants aboard the *Hyderabad* 'failed to give satisfaction as a body, from the insolence of a considerable number of them. The single females, who professed to be domestic servants, were generally ignorant of their business, and some went upon the streets.' As for the *Roman Emperor,* 'married couples and unmarried men [were] generally of a good description; but of the single females, several were of bad character', and there had been 'great freedom of intercourse between sailors and single women'. Female bad behaviour was thus the source of obsessive colonial concern, and other reports of women behaving badly went into greater detail. Thus, the surgeon-superintendent and the moral instructor aboard the *Duke of Portland* reported that since their arrival in Adelaide in the summer of 1850, several of the women passengers had been caught drinking and dancing in public houses, while a couple had slipped out overnight and had yet to return to the ship.

Throughout the voyage the conduct of these young women has been reprehensible in the highest degree. On deck as well as below their disgusting language, and in their own compartment their indecent songs, provoked continued complaints from the more respectable of their companions and the fathers of families with whom they mixed on deck; the most incessant vigilance alone prevented the occurrence of gross improprieties.[54]

Contamination was to be feared not only from single women passengers, but also from crew members. After the *Subraon* arrived at Sydney in the spring of 1849, it was discovered that some of the dozen Dublin orphan girls taken aboard had formed 'a connection of the worst kind' with the first mate, the third mate, and the captain himself. The girls were repeatedly seen intoxicated with the liquor given them by the captain and the mates, and were frequently visited at night by these men in the ship's single-female apartment, to which other sailors on board evidently also found access. 'There seems reason to believe that several of these girls are now pursuing at Sydney the evil courses into which they had been initiated on the voyage by the captain and his officers.' It also seemed clear that the death of one girl on board, who had been seduced by the first mate, was attributable not to fever, as originally reported, but to 'a hemorrhage, consequent on a miscarriage'.[55]

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[54]  Testimony of Edward Cousins and William Behan, 6 Aug. 1850, PP 1851 (347) (347-II), p. 177.
[55]  CLEC [T. W. C. Murdoch and Frederic Rogers] to Herman Merivale, 25 May 1849, PP 1849 (593) (593-II), pp. 113–14.

The *Subraon* scandal appears to have been well substantiated. In other cases, however, the rumours that swirled around female emigrants had no truth in them, and it seems a disproportionate share of those rumours attached to the orphan girls. Thus, according to the superintendent of Port Phillip, the *Melbourne Daily News* had reported that six of the orphans who had arrived in the *Manchester* 'were hired on their arrival by persons of notoriously bad character, at high rates of wages'. An investigation revealed that the story had been planted by a Geelong publican. He had hoped to hire two of the orphans, and, outraged when told that the regulations forbade single female immigrants from being employed in public houses, took his revenge by concocting this tale that the girls had been lured into prostitution and taking it to the newspaper.[56]

Thanks to such rumours, the Irish orphan girls' collective reputation had been thoroughly dragged through the mud by the time the orphan emigration scheme was wound up for good in 1850. In their post mortem on the scheme, the Irish Poor Law Commissioners pointed out reasonably enough that 'it must have been manifest when this branch of emigration was first proposed, that the materials from which the selection was to be made were not altogether of a hopeful character'. After all, that selection consisted 'exclusively of the children of the most indigent peasantry in the world, brought up from their earliest years in habits inseparable from extreme indigence, and afterwards maintained in large numbers in the workhouses in a state of absolute dependence on the public'. Small wonder they were deemed ill-trained for domestic service, since 'in truth, the only knowledge of household work which could have been acquired by girls in those establishments consisted of washing and laundering the workhouse linen, and scouring and dry-rubbing the floors of the dormitories'.[57] Small wonder, they might have added, that at least a few of them lost their way after being shipped 14,000 miles from Ireland, and when the institutional arrangements for their reception, elaborate though they were for the time, sometimes failed them. But it is hardly surprising that the Australian authorities tended to ignore such mitigating circumstances. To their minds, the best that could be said of the orphan emigration scheme was that it had dumped on them several thousand paupers who were under-qualified to enter the colonial workforce. The worst that could be said of the scheme was that in its ham-fisted effort to edify Australia through an infusion of female emigrants, the imperial state had weakened the colonial moral fibre it had sought to strengthen.

## III

Later in 1848, nearly 250 assisted emigrants, as sick as the Irish girls were healthy, either staggered or were carried off the *Arabian* in Georgetown,

[56] C. J. Latrobe to Earl Grey, 9 Apr. 1850, PP 1851 (347) (347-II), pp. 29–30.
[57] Irish Poor Law Commissioners to Sir Thomas Redington, 27 Nov. 1850, PP 1851 (347) (347-II), p. 254.

British Guiana. They were Africans who had recently been freed from slavers by the Royal Navy, shipped to Sierra Leone where they were lodged in a depot, the so-called African Yard, and there encouraged to emigrate to the British Caribbean as quickly as possible. They were told that the sugar plantations of the West Indies offered them much better pay and a better life than they could hope to achieve if they chose to stay in Sierra Leone. With unseemly haste, they were cajoled, even hustled, into making another middle passage within weeks of their rescue from slave ships. Their journey from Sierra Leone had taken only one tenth the time of the orphans' journey to Australia, and the weather was fair and the Atlantic placid throughout. Still, their ranks were steadily thinned as one or two of them perished at sea almost daily.[58] The health officer in Georgetown, John Maxwell Johnstone, had never seen a sight worse than the *Arabian* in his six years on the job. Since 1842, he had supervised the arrival of almost 2,000 assisted African emigrants. The average mortality rate prior to the *Arabian* had been 1 per cent. The mortality rate on the *Arabian* was over 8 per cent when it pulled in, and continued to climb in the next several weeks as more passengers died in hospital.[59]

Edward Drake Bach, a naval officer appointed by CLEC to oversee the voyage of the *Arabian*, had a disturbing tale to tell. 'I saw the emigrants embark [in Freetown]; many of them were in a weak and wretched condition, and exceedingly emaciated, little more than skin and bone.' The clothing supplied to them was inadequate, 'consisting merely of a shirt or frock, which were very dirty at the time of embarkation'. There were Africans from 'three distinct tribes' on board, with no interpreters on hand to help the ship's doctor communicate with the sick. Most of the passengers fell ill, and the diet, chiefly rice, was 'perfectly inadequate, and ill-adapted to the wants of the emigrants'. If the ship's crew had not served out extra biscuits, the mortality would have been far higher. There were two privies on board, but twelve would not have fully met the needs of the great many passengers afflicted with dysentery. 'The lower deck was in a filthy state every morning, on account of the extreme difficulty of getting the passengers to go to the privies; they got into every part of the vessel and eased themselves.' 'Some of the passengers', Bach continued, 'indeed most of them, went outside the ship, standing on the studding-sail boom, which caused the outside of the vessel to be in a filthy state. [I] never saw the outside of the vessel washed; it would have been of little use to wash it; it would have been dirty again in an hour.' 'I do not think the doctor of the *Arabian* would have taken the emigrants if he had seen them', Bach concluded. '[H]e might have taken some of them, perhaps half; [but] he was not consulted in any way as to the selection of the emigrants.'[60]

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[58] PP 1847–8 (399), p. 174.
[59] Ibid., p. 182.
[60] Ibid., pp. 176–7.

The *Arabian*'s surgeon, Robert Banks Penny, corroborated Bach's testimony. He noted that many passengers required help simply to climb the ladder into the vessel. 'The assistance was absolutely necessary, as some of them could not stand on deck; they were extremely weak, and emaciated, dirty, and ragged.' One of the emigrants succumbed to dysentery the same day he boarded, despite the medicine that Penny gave him. Some 100 passengers were already showing signs of dysentery as the *Arabian* remained at anchor off Freetown – 'the majority of the cases appeared serious, from the frequency of their evacuations'. When the Emigration Agent at Freetown, Richard J. Fisher, came on board, Penny called his attention to the wretched state of the emigrants.

[H]e told me they were certainly thin and lean; they had been only lately taken out of the slaver, but he did not think there was much the matter with them. I told him I differed from him; that they were sick, or had been lately sick, or half starved. He said they were all that way in the yard; that they came on shore from the slaver in a cramped position, and that he had known as many as 850 come out of a vessel of 150 tons…[I] was in no way concerned in the selection of the emigrants, nor consulted with regard to them. Was told by the emigration agent that I had only to count them as they came on board. Was not aware that I had any certificate to sign until it was handed to me for that purpose the afternoon before sailing. Had I been aware of it, I would have objected to receiving two-thirds of them; but [their] being [already] on board, and with the hope [I had] already expressed of saving the most of them, induced me to sign the certificate…The clothing was very dirty and ragged, and insufficient, the boys and men having only a shirt; a few of them had trousers. Some of them were landed in Demerara in a state of nudity, their clothing actually having been worn off.[61]

Whatever the fates in the new world of the Irish orphan girls who alighted from the *Earl Grey*, there is no doubt they had eagerly volunteered to emigrate there, while, as we have seen, the Australian authorities were reluctant at best to have them. Something close to the reverse is true of the almost simultaneous emigration of the African passengers aboard the *Arabian*. While not exactly forced to emigrate, their choice in the matter was severely circumscribed at best, and while the Guyanese planters were desperate to have them come to work in their faltering sugar plantations, there is ample reason to suspect that most of them would have happily remained in Sierra Leone had they been granted a truly free choice. The tale of the *Arabian* is another tale of assisted emigration in the age of *laissez-faire*. Like the Irish orphan scheme, it involved the imperial state in an ambitious exercise in social engineering. The goal in this case was to prevent the sugar monoculture and the civilization that it was thought to guarantee from regressing into the sort of barbarous subsistence society that was assumed to plague sites of relative black autonomy, such as Haiti and Sierra Leone, which were poorly connected to global commodity markets. In its

[61] Ibid., pp. 178–81.

haste to keep the British Caribbean safe for sugar monoculture, the imperial state seriously damaged its anti-slavery credentials, risking the lives of a good many of the Africans it had saved from the bellies of the slave ships.

It was the crisis provoked by the British parliament's passage of the 1846 Sugar Duties Act that brought the *Arabian* and other emigrant vessels like it to the West Indies. Since the abolition of apprenticeship in 1838, sugar planters had suffered from a labour shortage as many ex-slaves fled the plantations and those remaining were able to command higher wages at shorter hours. Things became grave for the planters when the Sugar Duties Act abolished the tariff that had protected the 'free' sugar of the British Caribbean in the enormous home market from open competition with cheaper-to-produce slave sugar from Cuba and Brazil. Sugar prices plummeted in the wake of free trade, pushing into bankruptcy a great many planters. To compete in the global market, British Caribbean planters needed to produce more sugar at lower prices. They insisted that the only way they could do so was by importing an army of indentured workers.[62]

The Colonial Office agreed, and facilitated the transfer to the West Indies of thousands of Africans liberated from slave ships. While from the early 1850s Indians constituted the vast majority of indentured immigrants, in the late 1840s, it was these so-called 'liberated Africans' who formed most of the immigrant cohort brought in to drive wages down and ex-slaves back to more regular work. The Royal Navy had been intercepting slavers in the Atlantic ever since the abolition of the British slave trade in 1807. Almost all of the Africans thus 'recaptured' were sent to Sierra Leone or St Helena. The 36,000 Africans conveyed to the Caribbean between 1841 and 1867 proceeded from these two colonies in roughly equal numbers.[63] Recruiting liberated Africans from St Helena was easy, as the island was unsuitable for permanent habitation.[64] Sierra Leone posed a much bigger challenge. Over the decades, tens of thousands of

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[62] William A. Green, 'Plantation society and indentured labour: the Jamaican case, 1834–1865', in P. C. Emmer, ed., *Colonialism and migration; indentured labour before and after slavery* (Dordrecht, 1986), 164. For planters' arguments about the salutary effect of imported labour on the creoles, see e.g. 5th Report, Select Committee on Sugar and Coffee Planting (testimony of Henry Barkly and Philip Miles, respectively), PP 1847–8 (206), pp. 19, 246.

[63] William A. Green, *British slave emancipation: the sugar colonies and the great experiment, 1830–1865* (Oxford, 1976), pp. 273–4.

[64] Indeed, the authorities sought to get liberated Africans off St Helena as quickly as possible, as it proved such an unhealthy environment. Mortality rates hovered around 30 per cent on the island. The health of the Africans who landed there was already badly compromised by long stretches of extreme deprivation aboard slavers chased by naval vessels over vast southerly stretches. It was quickly made worse by biting winds, contaminated water, and inadequate housing that the treasury was too cheap to improve despite the protests of the Colonial Office. Herman Merivale to Sir Charles Trevelyan (permanent undersecretary at the treasury), 27 Nov. 1849, TNA, Foreign Office papers 84/780, fo. 249; Earl Grey to Sir Patrick Ross (governor of St Helena), 17 Jan. 1850, PP 1850 (643), pp. 121–2; Sir Charles Trevelyan to Herman Merivale, 21 Dec. 1849, PP 1850 (643), p. 124; Sir Patrick Ross to Earl Grey, 14 Aug. 1849, PP 1850 (643), pp. 101–2.

liberated Africans had settled there. Remaining in the 'Province of Freedom' that had served as a haven for liberated slaves since the early 1790s[65] held obvious attractions for newly freed slaves. By the 1840s, however, the last thing the Colonial Office wanted was for newly liberated Africans to stay in Sierra Leone. Its mid-century pessimism about the colony reflected the broader waning of enthusiasm for anti-slavery as a world-historical crusade. The early hopes that lucrative cash crops might thrive in Sierra Leone had been dashed on its rocky soil, while early optimism about the economic capacities of blacks waned as the decades passed.[66] Already in the 1820s, to the extent Britons thought of Sierra Leone at all, it was as a sinkhole – 'a heavily subsidized, long-term dependency of the metropolitan treasury…more notable for receiving bodies than producing goods'.[67]

Feeling growing pressure to aid the beleaguered West Indian planters and no longer seeing Sierra Leone as a worthwhile home for liberated Africans, the Colonial Office first granted permission to the Caribbean colonies to try to recruit them in 1841. As the 1840s continued and the plight of the planters grew worse, recruitment efforts yielded only a few thousand volunteers. So the Colonial Office found itself ever more deeply implicated in an effort to ship off liberated Africans as quickly as possible. Fortunately for the imperial government, the flow of liberated Africans into the Yard at Freetown, which had slowed down to a trickle in the mid-1840s, suddenly became a flood by the latter months of 1847. Over the next couple of years, there were frequently up to 2,000 liberated Africans in the Yard at any one time. This was simply because free trade in sugar had caused a boom in the transatlantic slave trade. A veritable flotilla of slavers were now riding the waves to Brazil and Cuba, and the Royal Navy's African Squadron intercepted them in record numbers. Between late 1847 and late 1849, some 12,000 liberated Africans arrived in the British Caribbean, a full third of those who emigrated in the twenty-six-year history of the traffic.[68] This bumper crop of ex-slaves was ripe for the picking in the late 1840s, because the Colonial Office, intent on

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[65] See esp. Simon Schama, *Rough crossings: Britain, the slaves, and the American Revolution* (London, 2005), part II; Johnson U. J. Asiegbu, *Slavery and the politics of liberation, 1787–1861: a study of the liberated African emigration and British anti-slavery policy* (New York, NY, 1969), pp. 20–6.

[66] See esp. Philip D. Curtin, *The image of Africa: British ideas and action, 1780–1850* (Madison, WI, 1964), ch. 5.

[67] Seymour Drescher, *The mighty experiment: free labor versus slavery in British emancipation* (Oxford and New York, NY, 2002), p. 104. This view had long since settled into Colonial Office orthodoxy by the time Earl Grey dismissed Sierra Leone in a single sentence in 1853: '[C]omparing its actual condition with the length of time that has elapsed since the Colony was established, and with the very large amount of expenditure which for many years was incurred there by this country, I fear it must be admitted to have disappointed the expectations of its philanthropic founders.' The only good thing he had to say about Sierra Leone was that its civil establishment had been pared down to a puny £4,500 a year. Grey, *Colonial Policy*, II, pp. 292–3.

[68] CLEC, 14th annual report, PP 1854 [1833], p. 111.

making Sierra Leone a labour source for the West Indies, made it easier to harvest them by making it harder for them to exercise their right to stay in Sierra Leone. In 1844, it discontinued the traditional settling-in allowances to liberated Africans, thus obliging them to make a hasty decision either to emigrate, to enlist in the military, or to fend for themselves. The next year, it rescinded the sensible rule that liberated Africans had to spend at least six weeks recuperating in Sierra Leone before they could leave the colony.

Even when British officials were willing to concede that most liberated Africans seemed to *prefer* a subsistence life in Sierra Leone to higher wages on the Caribbean sugar estates, they ascribed that preference to the blissful ignorance of the savage.[69] They too heavily subscribed to the 'myth of the lazy negro' to be able to see the rationality of ex-slaves who opted for the relative autonomy of a subsistence way of life in Africa that owed nothing to white men.[70] Earl Grey was certain he knew better than the liberated Africans what was best for them. Disappointed by the Foreign Office opinion that it would be a violation of Britain's anti-slave trade treaties to force them to emigrate,[71] Grey pressed the governor of Sierra Leone, N. W. Macdonald, to do everything in his power to ensure the success of the West Indian emigration scheme. Grey told Macdonald that 'any conduct…which might oppose or discountenance it would not fail to be followed by' his 'serious displeasure'.[72] Macdonald could scarcely have read this as anything other than a threat that he would be sacked if he failed to deliver more liberated Africans on a more reliable basis.

The growing volume of liberated Africans in the Yard and the growing pressure on the Sierra Leonian authorities to ship them off set the stage for the particularly deadly phase in the traffic in which the *Arabian* tragedy occurred. The volume of liberated Africans crossing the Atlantic in the last quarter of 1847 and the first half of 1848 was peculiarly high, and so was the level of mortality among them – an average of 8 per cent on emigrant ships from Sierra Leone to the West Indies.[73] This was admittedly far lower than the notorious 'coffin ship' emigration from Ireland to British North America in 1847, when mortality rates reached 30 per cent. But the 'coffin ship' traffic was not closely supervised by CLEC. The liberated African traffic was, and so too was the emigrant traffic to Australia, the mortality rate for which in 1848 ran at only 1·5 per cent (on voyages that were four times longer).[74]

The evidence makes clear that a major factor in this unusually high mortality rate was the unseemly haste in which liberated Africans, many of them badly compromised by their ordeals aboard the slavers, had been hustled on board

[69] See e.g. testimony of John Logan Hook, PP 1847–8 (366), p. 77.
[70] Douglas Hall, *Five of the Leewards, 1834–1870* (St Lawrence, Barbados, 1971), pp. 99–100.
[71] Sir John Barrow to Benjamin Hawes, 22 Oct. 1847, TNA, Colonial Office papers 267/20, fos. 400–1.
[72] Grey to Macdonald, 15 Nov. 1847, PP 1847–8 (749), p. 400.
[73] Enclosure, CLEC report of 5 May 1848, PP 1847–8 (749), p. 106.
[74] PP 1850 [1204], p. 67.

the emigrant ships. Thus, after his inquiry into the 'wretched condition' of the Africans who had arrived in Georgetown aboard the *Arabian*, there was no doubt in Governor Henry Light's mind that 'the fault was in forcing the reception at Sierra Leone, of these people on board the *Arabian*, emaciated, half-starved, sick, and without clothing, in spite of the representations of the surgeon'.[75] We have already seen that witnesses in Freetown confirmed his suspicions. Testimony suggests that the haste with which the authorities in Sierra Leone sought to clear the Queen's Yard was a major factor in the high mortality that afflicted several other emigrant ships in the early months of 1848. Thirty-three of the *Amity Hall*'s 277 passengers died before the ship reached Kingston on 3 March, and another four while the ship was anchored in Kingston harbour. Forty-four more were taken to hospital with 'extreme debility arising from diarrhea'. The surgeon wrote in his medical journal that 'there was no time allowed, nor fit place allotted for inspection' in Freetown. While 'they were free from mutilation or infirmity incapacitating them from labour…at the same time a number of them appeared in a very weak state, and much emaciated, which might well be accounted for by their recent liberation'. On inspecting the *Amity Hall* in Kingston, David Ewart, agent general of immigration in Jamaica, found the passengers 'extremely dirty; no extra clothing had been provided for them, they were badly supplied with bedding, and the frocks they wore were torn and filthy'.[76]

The haste with which liberated Africans were dispatched from Sierra Leone to the Caribbean led to even greater mortality aboard the *Una*. Fifty-two of the 240 emigrants who boarded perished during the twenty-four-day voyage to Georgetown in April and May 1848 – 'from sheer starvation', according to Governor Light.[77] Another thirty-eight were hospitalized upon arrival.[78] '[S]ome appeared to be without flesh on their bones, in fact, the most perfect skeletons I ever saw, when they were taken on board', reported Commander J. G. Wigley of the Royal Navy, who witnessed their embarkation in Freetown. 'I accompanied the Governor of Sierra Leone to the yard, when his Excellency addressed the liberated Africans, through an interpreter, pointing out the advantages of emigration, but 167 were left in the yards, who positively refused to emigrate.'[79] As for those who boarded, Wigley reported, 'great numbers…[were] so deplorably emaciated that the skin appeared to be tensely stretched over and tied to the skeleton. The belly appeared, as it were, tacked to the back, whilst the hip, knee and blade-bones protruded precisely as in a skeleton.'[80]

[75] Governor Henry Light to Earl Grey, 2 Apr. 1848, PP 1847–8 (399), p. 172.
[76] David Ewart to Sir Charles Edward Grey, 16 Mar. 1848, PP 1847–8 (399), pp. 50–1.
[77] Light to Earl Grey, 17 May 1848, PP 1847–8 (749), p. 164.
[78] Ibid., p. 163.
[79] Wigley to William Walker, 6 May 1848, PP 1847–8 (749), p. 164.
[80] 'Extract of a report from Commander Wigley, naval officer on board the "Una"', n.d., enclosed in CLEC to Colonial Office, 13 June 1848, PP 1847–8 (749), 107.

During a nine-month interval of particularly intensive 'processing' in the last quarter of 1847 and the first half of 1848, mortality rates among liberated Africans en route to the British Caribbean averaged some 10 per cent, a rate akin to that of the eighteenth-century British slave trade.[81] By July 1848, Grey finally concluded that

the condition in which these emigrants have been sent from the African Yard, their state of debility, of sickness, and apparently of hunger,…appears to me to call for an immediate and strict inquiry into…whether any sufficient means are taken to preserve their health, after the hardships which they have suffered on board the slavers from which they have been taken.[82]

He did not acknowledge, and perhaps did not even see, that the pressure he had earlier put on Governor Macdonald to hasten the emigration of liberated Africans was likely the chief reason for the very high mortality rates in the interim period. In any case, shortly thereafter, CLEC implemented reforms that quickly brought the mortality rate down to the low single digits: a diet for the Queen's Yard that included considerably more biscuits and meat, closer medical supervision, more stringent instructions for the selection of emigrants, stronger efforts to procure shipboard interpreters, limiting to a third the proportion of child passengers, and ensuring that 'no emigrants should be embarked till they have been at least three or four weeks in the colony, and have received, during that time, sufficient diet and proper medical attendance'.[83] Ever mindful that their chief task was to encourage emigration, however, CLEC concluded that 'those Africans who consented to emigrate' from Sierra Leone 'should be separated at once from the rest, and should receive an ampler diet. We do not doubt that such a step would materially lessen the chances of disease on the voyage, and it might not improbably have the additional effect of increasing the disposition to emigrate.'[84]

It is an exaggeration to equate the liberated African emigration schemes of the 1840s with the revival of the slave trade.[85] However, as we have seen, remaining in Sierra Leone became (in the parlance of the day) a much 'less eligible' option for liberated Africans. By the late 1840s, a formidable arsenal of

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[81] See David Richardson, 'The British empire and the Atlantic slave trade, 1660–1807', in P. J. Marshall, ed., *The Oxford history of the British empire*, II: *The eighteenth century* (Oxford, 1998), p. 454.

[82] Earl Grey to 'the officer administering the government at Sierra Leone', 12 July 1848, PP 1847–8 (749), pp. 425–6.

[83] By Apr. 1849, CLEC was reporting that average mortality in emigrant ships sent from Sierra Leone to the West Indies was down to 1.5 per cent after spiking at 11.9 per cent for the first five ships sent over in 1848. CLEC to Colonial Office, 19 Apr. 1849, TNA, Colonial Office papers 386/56, fos. 291–3.

[84] CLEC to Colonial Office, 5 May 1848, PP 1850 (643), p. 115; see also Mary Elizabeth Thomas, *Jamaica and voluntary laborers from Africa: 1840–1865* (Gainesville, FL, 1974), pp. 133–5.

[85] As Asiegbu comes close to doing. Asiegbu, *Slavery and the politics of liberation*, esp. pp. 158–9.

pressures was brought to bear on them to emigrate as quickly as possible. Still, a good many of them continued to refuse to do so, and the authorities had no choice but to let them leave the Queen's Yard. In 1850, the last year that saw more than a handful of emigrants depart for the Caribbean, one in five liberated Africans opted to remain in Sierra Leone.[86] That same year, the virtual abolition of the Brazilian slave trade, largely inspired by British naval action against it, dried up the supply of liberated Africans. Now, British Caribbean planters would need to look to a much larger supply of Indian 'coolies' to revive the plantation economies. That supply was underwritten by a generous guaranteed loan from the imperial government, and met by an elaborate recruitment system administered by the government of India in close co-ordination with the Colonial Office.[87] The steady flow of Indian contract labourers ultimately rescued most of the sugar colonies.[88] But in the depths of the sugar crisis in the late 1840s, when Indian emigration was at ebb tide, liberated African emigration played the crucial role in saving the plantation economy. As Earl Grey himself retrospectively noted, the many thousands of liberated Africans sent to the West Indies 'at the cost of the British Treasury…have proved of great service to the planters'.[89]

## IV

Had the imperial authorities not believed that sugar equalled civilization in the West Indies, desperately sick 'liberated' Africans would never have been hustled aboard the *Arabian*. Had those authorities not believed that the key to continued civilizational advance in New South Wales was an adequate number of female emigrants, the orphans of the *Earl Grey* would likely never have left Ireland. Had those authorities not come to believe that depopulation was the key to Ireland's civilizational advance, Major Mahon's tenants would certainly have met different (although not necessarily better) fates than they did aboard the coffin ship *Virginius*. In important respects, the great British imperial migrations of the mid-nineteenth century were indeed unorchestrated. As the tales of these three voyages show, however, they also involved the imperial state in significant social projects with deeply ambivalent moral consequences, both when it chose to act and when it did not. Its *laissez-faire* approach to Famine emigration added to the Irish death toll. Its modest attempt to liberate orphans from

[86] PP 1851 [1383], p. 69.
[87] See e.g. K. O. Laurence, *Immigration into the West Indies in the nineteenth century* (Kingston, 1971), pp. 21–2.
[88] With the notable exception of Jamaica, where a political stalemate brought immigration to a virtual standstill. See Holt, *The problem of freedom*, chs. 6–7. For testimonials to the efficacy of 'coolie' immigration elsewhere, see e.g. 3rd Baron Harris to Sir John Pakington, 7 Aug. 1852, in Kenneth N. Bell and W. P. Morrell, eds., *Select documents on British colonial policy-making, 1830–1860* (Oxford, 1928), p. 443; Donald Wood, *Trinidad in transition: the years after slavery* (London, 1968), pp. 127–31.
[89] Grey, *Colonial policy*, I, p. 66.

Famine Ireland were stymied by Australian suspicions of moral pollution. Its effort to save Caribbean sugar from the economic consequences of *laissez-faire* endangered its 'liberated' African charges and compromised its anti-slavery credentials. Thus, we would do well to consider the allegedly 'spontaneous' mid-century migrations throughout the British world as morality tales in which the imperial state often played a conspicuous role, whether by its presence or its absence.