

Villain, victim or prophet?: William Gregory and the Great Famine

The name of Sir William Gregory features in most modern accounts of Ireland in the nineteenth century. It is fair to say, however, that usually he is regarded as a ‘villain’. Gregory is very widely known as the author of a piece of legislation introduced as part of relief measures during the Famine which sought to limit aid to those with a quarter acre or under of land and which became known as the Gregory clause or the quarter acre clause. An article in the *New York Times* on 16 July 2002 about the dedication of an Irish famine memorial in New York described the 5 million-dollar monument as follows: ‘The quarter-acre size of the monument adheres to the infamous Gregory clause passed by the British parliament in 1847, which decreed that cottiers whose plots exceeded that size would not be eligible for relief. The cottage is roofless because many farmers tore the thatches off their homes to prove destitution and qualify for relief.’ Most modern academic accounts of the Famine have been very critical of Gregory. It is widely accepted that the purpose of the Gregory clause was to assist landlords to clear their estates of pauperised smallholders who were paying little or no rent. This measure has been seen by some as leading to mass evictions and causing the clearance of many small farmers and labourers throughout Ireland. While Gregory has been criticised for the effects of his clause he has also been condemned for the words he used in parliament in March 1847, as recorded in *Hansard*, that he ‘did not see of what use such small farmers could possibly be’.¹

Some earlier commentators were also very critical of Gregory. In 1921 George O’Brien, the economic historian, described the Gregory clause as ‘one of the most effective legislative aids to ejection ever devised’.² In his 1875 history of the Irish Famine, Canon John O’Rourke remarked about the clause that ‘a more complete engine for the slaughter and expatriation of a people was never designed’. He quoted from Gregory’s speech in the 1847 parliamentary debate and then stated that Gregory’s words and the clause were ‘things that should be forever remembered by the descendants of the slaughtered and expatriated small farmers of Ireland’.³ Finally, we can note John Mitchel’s 1861 description of the clause as ‘the most efficient and cheapest of all the ejection acts’.⁴ A number of recent studies have reprinted these words of O’Rourke and Mitchel to condemn Gregory. At the same time, a few writers in modern days have pointed out that

¹ *Hansard* 3, xci, 589–90 (29 Mar. 1847).

² George O’Brien, *The economic history of Ireland, from the union to the famine* (1921, reprint, Clifton, N.J., 1972), p. 278.

³ John O’Rourke, *The history of the great Irish famine of 1847, with notices of earlier Irish famines* (Dublin, 1875; third edition, Dublin, 1902), pp 330–3.

⁴ John Mitchel, *The last conquest of Ireland (perhaps)*, ed. Patrick Maume (1861; reprint Dublin, 2005), p. 126.

Gregory was a good landlord and personally sought to alleviate suffering during the Famine, but they accept also a highly critical view of Gregory's involvement in the 'Gregory clause'.⁵

Nonetheless, in spite of this widespread condemnation of Gregory, there are grounds for looking more closely at Gregory's role during the Great Famine. A recent article on the parliamentary general election of August 1847 in Ireland investigated the response of over 140 parliamentary candidates in their speeches and election addresses to various issues, such as Gregory's quarter acre clause, which had already passed into law, although not operational at this point.⁶ Amazingly, it seemed that only two candidates in the entire country mentioned the clause. This suggested that very few realised that it would be so damaging, and that perhaps its consequences were unintentional. Two other pieces of evidence strengthened suspicions that this matter was worth further examination. A glance at the future career of William Gregory revealed that from 1857 to 1872 Gregory was returned, usually unopposed, as an M.P. for County Galway, where the Great Famine had been extremely severe.⁷ Another challenge to existing views of Gregory came from a study of press obituaries for Gregory, after his death in 1892. It has not proved possible to find a single discussion of the Gregory clause in these reports. This was the case, not only in the London *Times* but also in the *Tuam Herald* and *Galway Vindicator*.⁸ Indeed, the *Tuam Herald* carried a glowing tribute from the local Catholic bishop and clergy to Gregory. No one mentioned the Gregory clause or the role of Gregory in the Famine.

This study of Gregory will consider two basic matters. What were Gregory's intentions? What exactly were the effects of his intervention in 1847? To deal with these questions we will look at a number of areas. First, there will be a short account of his life, which seeks to describe his broad political and social approach. Secondly, we shall look at his intervention in 1847 as regards the Gregory clause and attempt an assessment of the exact effects of this clause. How did it work in practice during the Famine? How did Gregory refer to this matter subsequently? Thirdly, special attention will be paid to the debate in late March when he introduced his clause. Some of Gregory's words on this occasion have been quoted often and need to be examined closely. Fourthly, we will look at how new information from this investigation raises questions about what has been written about Gregory and the clause. Finally, our interest will focus on other aspects of Gregory in relation to the Great Famine which have been ignored in the past and which suggest that, in some important ways, his was a prophetic voice. This study will seek not only to explore the role of Gregory in these events, but also to explain why he has been blamed unfairly.

⁵ Brian Jenkins, *Sir William Gregory of Coole: the biography of an Anglo-Irishman* (Gerrards Cross, 1986), pp 73–5; Desmond McCabe, 'Gregory, Sir William Henry' in *D.I.B.*

⁶ B. M. Walker, 'Politicians, elections and catastrophe: the general election of 1847' in *Irish Political Studies*, xxii, no.1 (Mar. 2007), pp 1–34.

⁷ B. M. Walker (ed.), *Parliamentary election results in Ireland, 1801–1922* (Dublin, 1978).

⁸ *The Times*, 7 Mar. 1892; *Tuam Herald*, 19 Mar. 1892; *Galway Vindicator*, 9 Mar. 1892.

I

On 24 April 1847 the *Dublin Evening Mail* reported: ‘Among the many deaths which it has been our unpleasant duty to record, from the fever raging through the country, we have to record that of Robert Gregory, Esq., of Coole Park, Gort, who died on the 20th instant, after a few days’ illness, having contracted the disease at the relief committee of Kinvara, of which he was chairman. Mr Gregory was the eldest son of the late right hon. William Gregory, and the father of the member for this city.’ This information, that the Gregory family were famine victims, is worth mentioning, partly because few of William Gregory’s critics mention it, but also because it highlights the fact that the Gregory family were resident County Galway landlords who took their responsibilities as landowners very seriously. They owned some 15,000 acres in South Galway.⁹ Robert Gregory’s son, William Henry, was sent to England to Harrow and later to Oxford. In 1842, still only in his mid-20s, he was elected M.P. for Dublin city as a conservative, with Orange support. As a young man, Gregory spoke little during the following five years. We may note, however, a considerable independence of action on his part. In 1846 he supported Peel and repeal of the corn laws. During 1847 he made a number of speeches on the subject of the Famine and introduced two clauses into the new famine relief measures. He lost his seat at the 1847 general election, not due to the Gregory clause, but because of his support for corn law repeal and because some Orange supporters thought him too sympathetic to Catholic concerns.

Gregory then returned to the family estates where he spent the Famine years. In his autobiography, published after his death, he talks of the terrible suffering during this time and describes his efforts to alleviate suffering on his estate.¹⁰ He borrowed heavily from the Commission of Public Works to provide employment for his tenants. His wife, Lady Augusta Gregory, claimed later that throughout the Famine no tenants were evicted.¹¹ What credence can we give to all of this? In fact, there are independent reports about his efforts. In May 1849, at a public dinner in County Galway, a speaker declared about him, that ‘if other landlords would treat their tenantry in this way, there would not be such a number of houses levelled between Gort and Galway, nor would the tenantry in many instances have run off with their rents’.¹² At the end of 1849 a correspondent in the *Limerick Examiner* declared that Gregory was ‘no longer to be classed among a hard-hearted or oppressive landocracy... [his] demeanour convinces ... that in his heart there are mercy, charity and benevolence’. The report, however, went on to say that Gregory owed ‘reparation to the poor for his unfortunate connection with his clause of the poor law act’, which has gained ‘the proposer the monopoly of an unenviable renown’.¹³ These efforts by Gregory resulted in substantial financial losses, which were made worse by other debts incurred from his life-

⁹ Jenkins, *Gregory*, p. 84.

¹⁰ *Sir William Gregory, K.C.M.G., formerly member of parliament and sometime governor of Ceylon: an autobiography*, ed. Lady Gregory (London, 1894), p. 140; see also Jenkins, *Gregory*, pp 95–6.

¹¹ Colm Tóibín, *Lady Gregory’s toothbrush* (London, 2002), p. 25.

¹² Jenkins, *Gregory*, p. 95.

¹³ Reported in *Tuam Herald*, 8 Dec. 1849.

long interest in horse racing. In 1857 he was obliged to sell part of his lands under the Encumbered Estates Act, which, ironically, would lead to the removal of some tenants from former Gregory land by their new landlord. Nonetheless, he retained a substantial estate.

In 1857 Gregory stood as a liberal conservative candidate for County Galway.¹⁴ He faced opposition from Archbishop John MacHale, partly on account of the Gregory clause, but he enjoyed the strong support of the bishop of Kilmacduagh, Patrick Fallon. He defeated another landlord candidate and at subsequent general elections he was elected unopposed. In parliament he supported a number of issues of concern to the Catholic clergy, and backed disestablishment of the Church of Ireland. He voted for Gladstone's first land bill of 1870. In 1872 he stood down from parliament to become governor-general of Ceylon, a position which he held until 1877. He was knighted in 1875. His first wife died in 1873 and in 1880 he married the much younger Augusta Persse, who, as Lady Gregory, would later achieve great fame as one of the founders of the Irish literary renaissance. When the land reform movement began in 1879 in the west of Ireland, Gregory supported it initially.¹⁵ Later, however, he turned against the leaders who he believed were concerned more about other political matters besides land reform. Still, at a County Galway meeting of the Land League in November 1879, one of the speakers referred to Gregory as an 'excellent and most amiable man'.¹⁶ By the mid-1880s he had come to support land purchase. Gregory died in 1892.

II

Gregory's intervention in the Famine debates of 1847 must be examined in more detail. By the first half of 1847 there were two major government sponsored relief schemes in operation in Ireland.¹⁷ The first involved public works which provided employment for the poor, while the second established emergency food and soup depots and kitchens. It was envisaged, however, that both would be wound up largely by July/August, and in early 1847 the government announced its intention to adopt a new approach to deal with the Famine. Poor law unions would now be responsible for providing relief for the needy, through workhouses and outdoor relief. Unlike the other two schemes, the cost of this aid would be met locally by the raising of poor rates. Many Irish M.P.s, including Gregory, objected strongly to this scheme because they believed that the problem should be funded by the central exchequer. Also they argued that this scheme would create an impossible burden for Irish ratepayers, especially but not only the landlords, and would lead to the collapse of both the country and rural society. Gregory's intervention must be seen in this context.

At the beginning of February 1847, Gregory spoke favourably at Westminster on the scheme to provide food depots.¹⁸ At the same time he attacked the labour

¹⁴ Jenkins, *Gregory*, pp 129–34.

¹⁵ *Freeman's Journal*, 28 Oct. 1879. I am grateful to Paul Bew for this reference.

¹⁶ *Nation*, 8 Nov. 1879.

¹⁷ J. S. Donnelly jr., *The great Irish potato famine* (Stroud, 2001), pp 65–100.

¹⁸ Jenkins, *Gregory*, pp 71–2.

scheme on the grounds that often it involved useless projects which had been abused by individuals who were not in real need. On 12 March Gregory spoke twice in parliament. First, he asked Lord John Russell whether or not he intended in the new relief bill to limit relief to non-occupiers of land; in reply Russell urged Gregory himself to bring forward a clause on the matter. Later on the same day, in a debate on the poor law relief bill, Gregory argued that the open-ended access to relief as proposed in the bill meant that ‘the rental of Ireland would not suffice for the relief which might be demanded under this bill’. He was concerned also that it would lead to a loss of self-reliance in many rural areas. He urged the house not to sanction the bill, which he believed, ‘would have a more prejudicial effect upon the poor than upon the rich’.¹⁹ Nowhere does Gregory advocate clearance or eviction of tenants. In mid-March 1847, Gregory put down two clauses to amend the bill.

A fortnight later, on 29 March, Gregory addressed parliament on his proposed changes. He explained that the aim of his quarter acre clause was to ‘guard the provisions of the bill from abuse’ and so he sought to ensure that nobody holding more than a certain quantity of land should be eligible for aid. Originally he had proposed that the extent of such landholding would be half an acre or less, but, after a recent visit to Ireland, he thought that this limit was too extensive. He now recommended that aid should be restricted to those holding a quarter acre or less of land. This would still entitle the person who held a cottage and small plot of land to relief.²⁰ A short debate followed. Among those who opposed the clause, William Smith O’Brien warned that ‘in many cases this clause would operate with great harshness’, as it would compel a person holding over half an acre, who needed to seek aid for a few weeks, to abandon his holding. G. P. Scrope believed ‘its tendency was to effect the clearance of all the small farmers in Ireland’ and urged that provision of aid should be left to local discretion. Others, such as Stafford O’Brien and John Young, supported the measure on the grounds that a limit had to be set somewhere to prevent better-off farmers taking advantage of relief. In a brief response, Gregory defended the clause, and insisted that the resources of the country were not inexhaustible.

Analysis of those involved in the debate on the clause and in the vote on Gregory’s quarter acre clause makes interesting reading.²¹ A total of fifteen M.P.s made brief speeches, including only five Irish M.P.s, of whom two were for and three against. The 127 M.P.s present at the division vote on the clause divided between 118 for and nine against (including the tellers). On the list of the noes there were just three Irish M.P.s, namely W. S. Crawford (a liberal representing an English constituency), Alexander McCarthy (a repealer) and William Smith O’Brien (an Irish Confederate, one of the tellers). In his autobiography Gregory claimed that eight Irish M.P.s supported his measure but in fact twenty-six did.²² Repeal M.P.s, of whom there were over thirty in parliament in early 1847, were notable in their almost complete absence from the debate and vote on this critical change to the new poor law amendment, about which Gregory had given formal advance warning a fortnight earlier.

¹⁹ *The Times*, 13 Mar. 1847.

²⁰ *The Times*, 30 Mar. 1847.

²¹ *Hansard* 3, xci, 592–4 (29 Mar. 1847).

²² *Sir William Gregory*, ed. Lady Gregory, p. 135.

The quarter acre clause was only one of two clauses which Gregory introduced on this occasion. His other clause, which passed unopposed, and which has been forgotten by most commentators, was designed to give assistance to those who wished to emigrate.²³ Money would be provided by both the local board of guardians and the landlord. The issue of emigration continued to concern Gregory. A few days after this Commons debate, the press reported on the presentation of a memorial on the subject of emigration from Ireland to the prime minister.²⁴ This scheme had been devised by J. R. Godley, but put forward by M.P.s M. J. O'Connell, Gregory and Godley. The plan advocated a large scale scheme of colonisation in Canada for Irish emigrants, involving substantial public and private support as well as religious assistance for the emigrants. The subject was discussed at some length at Westminster on 1 June, and also in the press, but nothing came of it.

In August 1847 a general election occurred, but it seems that the quarter acre clause was almost entirely ignored in Ireland.²⁵ Gregory stood again for Dublin city. He lost his seat to a repealer, largely due to the loss of former supporters, thanks in part to his vote for repeal of the corn law, and in part to Orange criticism, due to his support for Catholic chaplains for emigrants under his colonisation scheme. The quarter acre clause received brief comment from his repeal opponent, John Reynolds, on the grounds that it 'must have the effect of swamping Dublin and the other large towns in Ireland by the paupers from their rural districts'.²⁶ Remarkably, an examination of the addresses and nomination speeches of over 140 candidates has revealed only one other reference to the clause. In County Clare, Charles O'Connell warned that the clause would 'drive our poor unprotected fellow creatures to despair' by compelling them to give up their homes before they could obtain relief.²⁷ O'Connell then withdrew from the contest, backed the conservative landlord candidate, Sir Lucius O'Brien, and, after his election, praised him in Irish (the only known instance of the use of Irish in these elections).²⁸ A report in the *Limerick Chronicle*, 18 August 1847, noted that O'Connell's house at Liscannor was 'maliciously demolished', due to his support of O'Brien.

In the Co. Galway election, there was a lengthy discussion of the Famine, but not of the clause.²⁹ It seemed for a time that the county would be contested, but in the event the two sitting M.P.s were elected unopposed. The most outspoken speech on the Famine at the nominations came from one of the candidates who withdrew later. A Peelite, he spoke of the great suffering of the Famine victims and denounced the uncaring attitude of the English press. He declared that his sole object was 'to procure justice for my countrymen'. This candidate was William Gregory who turned up in County Galway after his Dublin defeat, but in the end did not stand. The *Tuam Herald*, 14 August, made a rare reference to 'Quarter-acre Gregory' although the issue of the clause was not discussed by

²³ *The Times*, 30 Mar. 1847.

²⁴ Gerard Moran, *Sending out Ireland's poor; assisted emigration to North America in the nineteenth century* (Dublin, 2004), pp 70–80.

²⁵ See Walker, 'Politicians, elections and catastrophe, especially p. 31.

²⁶ *Freeman's Journal*, 2 Aug. 1847.

²⁷ *Clare Journal*, 2 Aug. 1847.

²⁸ *Clare Journal*, 19 Aug. 1847.

²⁹ *Galway Mercury*, 7 Aug. 1847; *Western Star*, 14 Aug. 1847.

Gregory or anyone else. Gregory described his efforts in parliament over famine relief: 'I wished to save the people from starvation – that was the first consideration uppermost in my mind – the next was, how was the money to be expended?' In August 1847 the Galway press carried a copy of a petition from County Galway grand jury members, all leading landlords including Gregory, to the commissioners of the treasury in London, warning that local resources for the alleviation of destitution were already fully stretched and urging assistance from central sources.³⁰ Such pleas were ignored, both in London and Galway. On 16 August, the day the soup kitchens closed, a well attended public dinner was held by repealers in Galway to celebrate their election victory. One of the two Galway M.P.s, M. J. Blake, refused to attend on the grounds that 'during this season of famine and pestilence, a festivity of this sort is at least unseemly', but the dinner went ahead.³¹ The closure of the soup kitchens in mid-August attracted little criticism anywhere in Ireland. Many believed that the worst of famine was over, but this proved to be false, and by September the effects of famine were clearly in evidence again.

What can we say about the effects of the Gregory clause? Three aspects must be dealt with. The first is the harm that the clause undoubtedly caused. The clause declared that from the beginning of November 1847 famine relief, indoor and outdoor, at the workhouses administered by the poor law boards of guardians, would be limited to those with a quarter acre or less of land. Reports of the Central Relief Committee of the Society of Friends record how during 1848 many families in the west of Ireland, who did not qualify for aid, because their holdings were over a quarter acre and who were anxious to hold on to their homes, experienced starvation and 'in many instances several members of a family will have died before the remainder will give up and qualify for relief'.³² Even before the enactment of the quarter acre clause people had often been reluctant to enter the workhouse because it meant leaving their homes, and while the new arrangements did allow outdoor relief for the first time, this related only to those with a quarter acre or under.³³ For those who wished to receive relief, indoor or outdoor, there was a requirement to surrender their holdings of over a quarter acre. This meant that in many cases when people came off relief they often had no longer a home or any means of growing crops again, and few opportunities for employment. This situation was aggravated by the tendency for landlords to knock down vacant houses. Sometimes this followed the surrender of the entire holding including the house but other times it occurred (illegally) even when the tenant had not formally given up his home before going to seek relief.

The second point to be made about the clause is that its effects were ameliorated considerably in practice. Its aim was to prevent aid going to those with more than a quarter acre, but it is clear that in many places it failed to do so. The government, it can be noted, was concerned that the clause should not be

³⁰ *Tuam Herald*, 21 Aug. 1847.

³¹ *Tuam Herald*, 28 Aug. 1847.

³² *Transactions of the central relief committee of the Society of Friends during the famine in Ireland* (1852: reprint, Dublin, 1996), pp 455–6.

³³ *First annual report of the commissioners for administering the laws for relief of the poor in Ireland*, H. C. 1847–8, xxxiii, p. 13.

enacted too stringently. Even before it came into operation in November 1847, the Irish lord lieutenant, Lord Clarendon, on 8 Oct. 1847, wrote to the prime minister, Lord Russell: 'With regard to the quarter acre test we must proceed cautiously or we shall be creating a permanent set of paupers who need not of necessity become so.' He continued: 'The test of destitution was made for the poor law under ordinary circumstances, as it is a most useful and proper safeguard, but under extraordinary circumstances as this year it must not be stringently enforced.'³⁴ In January 1848 Clarendon wrote again to Russell: 'I am afraid that the ¼ acre test, which though necessary is by no means free from objections, may be driven too hard if we don't impose some check.'³⁵ Practical problems arose about its operation. For example, a question surfaced about the case where the occupant stayed in his holding of over a quarter acre but his wife and children requested aid. A ruling from the government's chief law officer in May 1848 stated that they were entitled to this aid. A witness before the 1849 select committee of the house of lords on the Irish poor law, reported: 'I think that many persons went without relief who were in great need of it, on account of the quarter acre clause: its operation was considerably changed after the opinion was given that the wife and children were entitled to relief.'³⁶

In addition, other witnesses, in this and other enquiries, described how in spite of the aim to restrict aid to those with a quarter acre or less, in many areas this did not happen for humanitarian and practical reasons. A number of witnesses before this 1849 select committee of the house of lords admitted that in the case of County Mayo a large number of people who occupied more than a quarter acre also received relief.³⁷ One speaker claimed that of those persons in County Mayo in receipt of aid in July 1848, numbering nearly 200,000, probably one third were occupiers of land exceeding a quarter of an acre at the time. When challenged that they were not entitled to relief, he said simply; 'but I believe many of them required relief, nevertheless.'³⁸ This failure to administer the clause rigorously in many places was a result of the size of the problem, the willingness of guardians to respond to a human crisis and the ability of desperate people to get round the rules. Difficulties arose over identifying those who qualified. Another witness described how in the Castlebar Union, in County Mayo, at the previous July, 'The pressure was so great... that it was almost impossible to make proper inquiry into the circumstances of the people seeking relief; the pressure was enormous; on some occasions 4,000 or 5,000 persons applied for relief in one week.'³⁹ A decade later, due to Griffith's Valuation, such identification would have been much easier. From this and other inquiries and reports we have plentiful evidence of people colluding with neighbours, relatives and landlords to qualify for relief. On the other hand, some witnesses accepted the need for the Gregory clause, in spite of its failings, because they believed that if an effort was not made to control the

³⁴ Lord Clarendon to Russell, 8 Oct. 1847 (Bodl., out-letter book, MS Clarendon deposit Irish, vol. 1, f. 73).

³⁵ Lord Clarendon to Russell, 4 Jan. 1848 (Bodl., out-letter book, MS Clarendon deposit Irish, vol. 2, ff 61–2).

³⁶ *First report from the select committee of the house of lords appointed to inquire into the operation of the Irish poor law*, H.C. 1849, xvi, 361.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 4991–3, 6890.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 4993.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 6178.

system of relief it would be overwhelmed. A witness from Kenmare in March 1849 acknowledged the harshness of the clause, but accepted it as necessary under existing circumstances: Kenmare union workhouse which had been built for 500 now accommodated 1,930.⁴⁰

The third point relates to the question of evictions, post-August 1847. Figures for evictions rose dramatically in the period after the passing of the 1847 famine relief act. The main cause of this rise, however, was not the Gregory clause but another clause which placed the cost of relief on local ratepayers. Thanks to a clause in the 1843 poor law amendment act, rates for those on holdings valued at £4 or less became the responsibility of the landlord. This change to the law happened because of widespread public protest in 1842–3. What wasn't foreseen was that after August 1847 the rates went up to pay for the growing expenditure on famine relief in the poor houses, and landlords now found that many tenants were unable to pay rents, while the landlords remained responsible for their rates. The result was that many landlords determined to evict such tenants and demolish their houses in order to avoid rates.⁴¹ These evictions, for specific causes such as non-payment of rents, involved a legal process and were recorded by the constabulary from 1849. Their figures record a total of nearly 250,000 persons formally and permanently evicted from their holdings between 1849 and 1854: note these figures do not include 1848 and go beyond 1850.⁴² People who lost their homes due to the Gregory clause were not included here normally, because these were regarded as voluntary and, strictly speaking, not evictions. It is wrong to mix up those who lost their homes due to the Gregory clause with those who were evicted mainly due to this 1843 clause which placed on landlords responsibility for the rates of tenants on holdings of £4 and under, and so caused widespread evictions. Two recent studies of evictions during the Famine strongly condemn the Gregory clause but make no reference to the 1843 clause and its harsh consequences.⁴³

Gregory lost his parliamentary seat in August 1847, and we have no record during the next few years of how he viewed the consequences of his clause. In 1852, however, he considered standing as a candidate for County Galway in the general election of that year. His candidature was challenged by John Derry, Catholic bishop of Clonfert, on the grounds of 'the unfortunate association of his name with a most disastrous clause in the famine relief acts'.⁴⁴ In a letter to the local Gort priest, but obviously for the attention of Derry, Gregory defended himself on this matter. He stated that the object of the clause had been to preserve the ratepayers, 'the greater part hardly better off than the recipients of relief, from the total ruin which the absence of such checks wd have entailed'. He wrote that had he been present later in the Commons, he would 'have unquestionably declared that its object was for the usual working of the poor law, and not an enactment fitted for the emergency of a famine'. He emphasised that 'it was

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 1991–2021.

⁴¹ Donnelly, *Great Irish potato famine*, pp 150–3.

⁴² *Ibid.*, pp 139–40.

⁴³ L. Perry Curtis, *The depiction of eviction in Ireland, 1845–1910* (Dublin, 2011), pp 27–56; T. P. O'Neill, 'Famine evictions' in Carla King (ed.), *Famine, land and culture in Ireland* (Dublin, 2000), pp 29–70.

⁴⁴ Jenkins, *Gregory*, pp 117–18.

never meant at least by me to be applied in an emergency so terrible'.⁴⁵ In the end Gregory decided not to let his name go forward.

Five years later, in 1857, Gregory did stand for election in County Galway. This time he addressed the question of the quarter acre clause in a letter to the local press. This was a very odd statement. He stated that the act had been passed in 1845, and not 1847, and argued that his purpose had been to protect those with a quarter acre or less. The onset of famine, subsequently, meant 'that which was originally an instrument of mercy became an instrument of eviction'. He strongly rejected the criticism of him: 'my whole life and conduct, as a landlord, is a denial that I could be guilty of harsh and cruel legislation.' He referred to *Hansard* to support his arguments and to the local Catholic clergy to verify his good treatment of his tenants.⁴⁶ This rather bizarre response seems to have aroused no particular reaction and Gregory was elected in opposition to another County Galway landlord, thanks to the strong support of one of the local Catholic bishops and his soundness over issues of contemporary interest. In 1859 he won the seat again against competition but with no reference to the Famine or the Gregory clause. Subsequently, he was re-elected at the following general elections, 1865–68, without any opposition or public challenge over the quarter acre clause. He resigned in 1872 to take up the post of governor general to Ceylon. Twenty years later he died in London and was buried at Gort.

The obituaries for Gregory make interesting reading. All were generous in their praise of him: not one mentioned the Gregory clause or his role during the Famine. The *Times* in London, as we might have expected, gave a glowing, lengthy account of his career, which concentrated on his parliamentary and horseracing achievements, with no mention of the Famine.⁴⁷ Less expected perhaps was the response in Ireland. The *Irish Times* carried a very favourable account of his life from the *Daily Telegraph*.⁴⁸ The *Galway Vindicator* declared its 'sincerest feelings of regret' about Gregory's death, and said he was 'no ordinary man'. He was distinguished for his 'statesmanlike views on almost every subject' and was 'one of the ablest debaters in the house of Commons'.⁴⁹ The *Tuam Herald*, which had carried critical comments about the quarter acre clause during the Famine, announced his death 'with deep regret' and stated that 'as a parliamentarian and as the governor of the island of Ceylon [he] made a brilliant reputation for himself'. The paper also contained a resolution of condolence with Lady Gregory from a conference of the Catholic clergy of the local diocese: 'we, as the bishops and priests of Kilmacduagh in conference assembled, have heard with deep regret of the death of Sir W. H. Gregory, whom we have long known as a kind landlord, and whose able advocacy of claims we shall continue to remember with gratitude.'⁵⁰ It has not been possible in these obituaries to find a single word of condemnation of Gregory for his role in the Famine.

⁴⁵ Copy of letter from William Gregory to Rev. M. Kelly, conveyed to Dr John Derry, March 1852 (Gregory papers, Emory University, box 21, folder 2).

⁴⁶ *Tuam Herald*, 4 Apr. 1857.

⁴⁷ *The Times*, 7 Mar. 1892.

⁴⁸ *Irish Times*, 8 Mar. 1892.

⁴⁹ *Galway Vindicator*, 9 Mar. 1892.

⁵⁰ *Tuam Herald*, 12 and 19 Mar. 1892.

Two years after Gregory's death, an autobiography, edited by his wife, was published. In some two-and-a-half pages, he dealt with the clause, mainly by quoting from an article on him written by Oliver Burke in 1876 in the *Dublin University Magazine*. Burke first reminded readers of the other clause to aid emigration which Gregory also introduced in March 1847. He then explained that Gregory introduced his quarter acre clause to provide a necessary test to prevent undeserving persons claiming aid and so place an intolerable burden on the land and public funds. Burke acknowledged that this clause had been 'perverted to do evil', but, he remarked, 'the evil results we have alluded to were not then foreseen'. Gregory stated that in March 1847 only nine M.P.s opposed the clause and of these only two were Irish (in fact a third Irishman who represented an English constituency also opposed it), while eight Irish M.P.s voted for it (in fact twenty-six Irish M.P.s voted for it). He declared: 'there is no doubt but that the immediate effect of the clause was severe. Old Archbishop MacHale never forgave me on account of it. But it pulled up suddenly the country from falling into the open pit of pauperism on the verge of which it stood. Though I got an evil reputation in consequence, those who really understood the conditions of the country have always regarded this clause as its salvation.'⁵¹ The *Freeman's Journal* carried an extensive and favourable review of Gregory's autobiography and made no reference at all to his role in the Famine.⁵²

III

One important issue which must be tackled in greater depth is the whole matter of Gregory's attitude. This hinges considerably on what he actually said at the debate on the poor relief bill on 29 March 1847. *Hansard* reported how he responded to the remark that his clause 'would destroy all the small farmers' with the words: 'If it could have such an effect, he did not see of what use such small farmers could possibly be.'⁵³ His language has been described as 'dismissive and even contemptuous' by one modern historian.⁵⁴ Canon O'Rourke wrote in 1875 that the clause and his words should never be forgotten by the descendants of those 'slaughtered and expatriated' by this piece of legislation.⁵⁵ This key passage must be investigated. How do we treat it? His biographer, Brian Jenkins, explained the Gregory clause as simply part of Gregory's efforts to protect landlord interests and described how he 'cavalierly dismissed' criticism with these words.⁵⁶ Another approach might be to argue that he made a serious error of judgement in this instance but in later years he led an exemplary life.

There is a third approach and that is to say that he never used these actual words. There are good reasons for rejecting this text. The first is that this is not the sort of language which Gregory used at any stage in his career. He did not employ the heartless language reported here which implied that he was

⁵¹ *Sir William Gregory*, ed. Lady Gregory, pp 133–6.

⁵² *Freeman's Journal*, 15 Nov. 1894.

⁵³ *Hansard* 3, xci, 589–90 (29 Mar. 1847).

⁵⁴ Donnelly, *Great Irish potato famine*, p. 102.

⁵⁵ O'Rourke, *History of the great Irish famine*, p. 331.

⁵⁶ Jenkins, *Gregory*, pp 72–3.

completely unconcerned about the fate of the small farmers of Ireland. Secondly, we cannot rely on *Hansard* in this period. Today, *Hansard* is a government-run, verbatim report of daily proceedings at Westminster. In this period, it was privately owned and often carried accounts from newspapers. Because of this, as the 1956 H.M.S.O. bibliography of parliamentary debates of Great Britain noted: 'there is therefore no special authority attached to *Hansard* until after 1909.'⁵⁷ We have other examples of the unreliability of *Hansard* in this period.⁵⁸ Thirdly, there is another more reliable account of what he actually said and that is the version (emphasis added) recorded the following day in the *Times* of London and reprinted in the *Freeman's Journal* of Dublin.

Mr Gregory must say that some hon. Gentlemen maintained the right of the poor to relief to an extent so extensive that they seemed to look on the property of Ireland as exhaustless. **Many hon. Members insisted that the operation of a clause of this kind would destroy all the small farmers. If it could have such an effect, he did not see of what use such small farmers could possibly be.** He should of course adopt any reasonable amendment that was proposed; but if some such clause as he had submitted was not carried, the cry of the 'poor man's guardian' would be raised in every electoral division in Ireland, and the proper working of the bill be thereby greatly impeded.

Hansard 3, xci, 590 (29 March 1847)

Mr Gregory thought some hon. Members seemed to suppose the resources of Ireland inexhaustible, and able to bear any burden whatever. **As for this clause destroying the small farmers, of what value could their farming be if this would affect them? (Hear, hear) He was quite willing to commence the clause with the words 'from and after the 1st of November next,'** but he could not consent to have the right to relief in these cases left to the discretion of the guardians; there would be nothing but a cry for 'poor man's guardians' all over the country.

Times, 30 Mar. 1847

According to the *Times*, 30 March 1847, Gregory declared: 'As for this clause destroying the small farmers, of what value could their farming be if it would affect them.' This is different in both content and tone to the sentences attributed to him in *Hansard*. There are also differences in his other earlier speech on the quarter acre clause. From this first speech, Gregory has been quoted as saying that the small holding class was 'no longer an object of pity'.⁵⁹ The *Times* has no reference to this statement so it is unclear what exactly he said here. This is in fact a paraphrase of a longer statement in *Hansard*, where he says that 'where a man held a large piece of land – half an acre, one, two or three acres – he was no longer an object of pity', meaning he was not a destitute person for whom this relief was meant.⁶⁰ We may note his final point in his opening speech, recorded in the *Times* but not in *Hansard*, that he accepted that persons of the class referred to in his clause, namely paupers, the destitute and those holding a quarter acre or less, were entitled to outdoor relief. Why should we rely on the *Times* account

⁵⁷ *A bibliography of parliamentary debates of Great Britain* (London, 1956), p. 14.

⁵⁸ Thomas MacKnight, *The Right Honourable Benjamin Disraeli, M.P., a literary and political biography* (second edn, 1854; reprint, London, 2006) pp 433–4.

⁵⁹ C. L. Falkiner, revised by Peter Gray, 'Gregory, Sir William Henry (1816–1892)' in *Oxford D.N.B.*

⁶⁰ *Hansard* 3, xci, 585–7 (29 Mar. 1847).

rather than the *Hansard* version? If we look at the rest of the *Times* report we find a sentence which we can say, beyond doubt, is correct and is missing in *Hansard*. That is the passage in his second brief speech where he says he is willing to commence the clause from 1 November, a statement missing from *Hansard*. This, in fact, is what appears in the act as it is finally printed. Only the *Times* version reveals the change and it is for this reason we should place greater weight on these sentences than on the *Hansard* version.

What did he mean when he made such remarks, as recorded by the *Times*? These few sentences must be set in the context of Gregory's approach to the whole question of famine relief. Earlier in March he had stated his opposition to the bill, primarily because of its believed cost. He sought to avoid the abuse of the system which he had seen previously over provision of aid through labour schemes. Therefore, he begins this passage by warning that the resources of the country are not 'inexhaustible'. Next, in response to the argument that his measure will destroy the small farmers, he is simply saying that if small farmers decide to give up their land to qualify for aid their holdings cannot be of great value to them. By using the word 'if', this implies that he does not think this likely, but, should it happen, then their farming cannot have been important for them. He does not use the phrase, which we read in the other quotation, that 'he did not see of what use such small farmers could possibly be', and which has caused great offence. He is clearly not expecting that many of them will surrender their holdings and homes, as this would increase demands for relief and cause the very rise in expenditure which he was keen to prevent. At the same time, in his earlier speech he had accepted that persons on a quarter or less of an acre of land had a right to outdoor relief, suggesting that he did not envisage them giving up their homes, even if they gave up their holdings (reported in the *Times* but not in *Hansard*). This quarter acre clause was not introduced with the aim of clearing or evicting people from their homes. Some contemporaries, both for and against the clause, saw it in such a detrimental light, as have some modern writers, but there is no evidence that this view informed Gregory's approach to the subject.

Another interesting part of the *Times* report, however, is the next sentence, which says: 'he was quite willing to commence the clause with the words "from and after the 1st of November next".' This information is not in *Hansard*, but the published act does carry this date. The delay in the operation of the clause has been missed by most commentators, modern and historical. Many have assumed that the clause became active in August, along with the rest of the act, or even earlier. The consequence is that Gregory has been blamed for clearances before his clause became operational. When we study comments by writers about Gregory and the Gregory clause, we find that not only has he been misquoted, but also he has been criticised for clearances before November 1847, before his clause had been enacted, as well as for clearances after that date which were not related to the clause. The impact of the 1843 act which placed payment of rates on holdings under £4 onto landlords and which led to many evictions has often been ignored. A survey of the main commentators about Gregory shows clearly how his motives and the affects of his clause have been seriously misrepresented.

IV

The year 1861 saw the first appearance in book form of John Mitchel's *The last conquest of Ireland (perhaps)*, with its strong denunciation of British policies during the Famine. He recounted how the government in early 1847 introduced a number of pieces of legislation to deal with the Famine, including the Irish relief bill, with its quarter acre clause which Mitchel called 'the most efficient and cheapest of all the ejectment acts'. As proof of the iniquity of the clause, he described how in March 1847 some 730,000 persons were employed on labour schemes but their numbers were now drastically reduced over succeeding months, and relief was denied to those with more than a quarter acre.⁶¹ This account, in fact, is completely mixed up. The relief bill, including the Gregory clause, had not even passed parliament at this stage, never mind become operational. Following the reduction of those employed on public works, food kitchens provided aid for millions without any such quarter acre test. Mitchel goes on to denounce the high number of deaths to have occurred by September 1847, but, as we have noted, this was not a consequence of the quarter acre clause which did not become operational until November.

In the early 1870s Canon John O'Rourke produced his history of the Famine which included evidence from contemporaries about their experiences of the Famine. We must note, however, that his book is entitled *The history of the great Irish famine of 1847, with notices of earlier Irish famines*, and does not go beyond the end of 1847. Like Mitchel his comments on the quarter acre clause are very confused.⁶² He stated that the poor relief (Ireland) bill 'became law on the 16th of April', even though it only received its third reading on that day and would not receive royal assent until July (in a second place in the book he acknowledges that the bill became law in July). He declared that Gregory's name 'must remain for ever associated with this measure, on account of two clauses which he succeeded in having incorporated with it'. O'Rourke described briefly Gregory's emigration clause, and then dwelt at length on the quarter acre clause. He gave what he called a full transcript of the clause, and said that; 'a more complete engine for the slaughter and expatriation of a people was never designed'. This transcript, however, is from *Hansard* and not from the published act itself, and has no mention of the starting date of November. He also quoted from Gregory's speech as misreported in *Hansard* which implied that the small farmers were of no value. He urged that the actions and words of Gregory should never be forgotten by the descendants of the dispossessed. In his book O'Rourke gave many examples of suffering during the Famine, but in no case did he actually relate these to the quarter acre clause which, of course, is not surprising since the clause became effective only in the last two months of 1847 when his book concludes. No doubt, O'Rourke was expressing heart felt anger about the Gregory clause, but he used unreliable sources and blamed Gregory for suffering which predated the operation of the clause. Neither Mitchel nor O'Rourke mentioned the clause in the 1843 act, which placed payment of rates of the poorer farmers on landlords and led to many evictions.

⁶¹ Mitchel, *Last conquest*, p. 126.

⁶² O'Rourke, *History of the great Irish famine*, pp 330–4.

In 1921, George O'Brien produced his economic history of Ireland. He described the Gregory clause as a device of government to facilitate eviction: 'one of the most effective legislative aids to ejectment ever devised'.⁶³ For evidence he quoted from a poor law commissioners' report and repeated the remarks by Mitchel and O'Rourke, recorded above. While these works by O'Rourke, Mitchel and O'Brien are critical of the Gregory clause, it must be pointed out that other contemporary nationalist histories of Ireland did not mention the clause. For example, Michael Davitt in his 1904 volume, *The fall of feudalism in Ireland*, described numerous evictions in the latter years of the Famine but did not relate them to Gregory in any way.⁶⁴ A. M. Sullivan in his *Story of Ireland* denounced evictions but did not blame them on Gregory.⁶⁵

Attention must now focus on what historians have said in recent times about Gregory and the quarter acre clause. The first modern study of the Great Famine appeared in 1956 in a collection of essays edited by R. Dudley Edwards and T. Desmond Williams. In this work there were only a few references to the quarter acre clause. The rise in evictions post-1847 was blamed primarily on the workings of the new poor law system, in particular the liability of landlords for rates on holdings of less than £4. The quarter acre clause was also blamed for evictions, and some examples were given of its harsh operation, but it was pointed out that opinions varied on its effect.⁶⁶ The year 1962 saw the publication of Cecil Woodham-Smith's best-selling book, *The great hunger: Ireland 1845–9*, with its emotive descriptions of the suffering during the Famine and its strong denunciation of official policies. She attributed the increase in distress in Ireland after 1847 to two reasons. The first was the quarter acre clause, but she pointed out how after May 1848 its operation was relaxed for families, and gave a contemporary quote that thanks to this 'many lives were saved, which would certainly otherwise have been lost'. Far more numerous, she said, 'were the applications for relief, the result of a sharp increase in evictions due to the liability of the landlord for rates on holdings rated at £4 and under, whether the rent was paid or not'.⁶⁷

The first academic study in any depth of the quarter acre clause came in James Donnelly's *The land and the people of nineteenth-century Cork*, published in 1975. In his chapter on the Great Famine in County Cork he remarked how this provision of the poor law relief act 'became notorious because of the way in which it both promoted forced starvation and facilitated the clearance of paupers from over-crowded estates'.⁶⁸ He called it an 'ill-considered gesture' on behalf of Irish landlords and he presented compelling examples of the harsh effects of the clause. At the same time, he pointed out the efforts which people made to evade the law to obtain relief. He also showed how the law was modified by the poor-

⁶³ O'Brien, *Economic history*, p. 278.

⁶⁴ Michael Davitt, *The fall of feudalism in Ireland or the story of the land league revolution* (1904; reprint, Shannon, 1970), p. 68.

⁶⁵ A. M. Sullivan, *The story of Ireland* (Dublin, 1905), pp 565–6.

⁶⁶ T. P. O'Neill, 'The organization and administration of relief, 1845–52' in R. D. Edwards and T. D. Williams, (eds), *The great famine: studies in Irish history, 1845–52* (Dublin, 1956), pp 240–1, 253–4.

⁶⁷ Cecil Woodham-Smith, *The great hunger: Ireland, 1845–1849* (New York and London, 1962), p. 363.

⁶⁸ James S. Donnelly jr., *The land and the people of nineteenth-century Cork: the rural economy and the land question* (London, 1975), pp 98–100.

law commissioners to allow greater take-up of relief. The clause, Donnelly argued, facilitated clearances of tenants but he clearly accepted that there were other opportunities for landlords to remove tenants. He acknowledged the importance of the liability of landlords for all rates of holdings valued at £4 for promoting clearances. He quoted remarks in 1866 by Cork landowner, Sir Denham Jephson-Norreys, that the £4 rating clause had ‘almost forced the landlords to get rid of their poorer tenantry; in order that they should not have to pay for these small holdings, they destroyed the cottages in every direction.’⁶⁹ The year 1986 saw the publication of Mary Daly’s book, *The famine in Ireland*. She described the increasing reliance on relief after 1847 which she believed ‘reflected the impact of both evictions and the Gregory clause’. She declared: ‘It is impossible to assess the numbers forced into the workhouse by the Gregory clause. It probably only worked to intensify an already-strong tendency towards eviction on the part of Irish landlords faced with crippling rates burdens and a mass of destitute tenants who were heavily in arrears.’⁷⁰

In 1989 James Donnelly published a number of important chapters on the Famine in volume five of the *New History of Ireland*. He devoted some time to the consequences of the quarter acre clause, which he called ‘infamous’ and a ‘draconian provision’. He claimed that ‘its purpose was to arm landlords with a weapon that would enable them to clear their estates of pauperised small-holders who were paying little or no rent’. He blamed clearances in the south and west on the use of the clause by landlords and described how many people starved rather than give up their holdings. At the same time, he acknowledged that the operation of the clause was relaxed by rulings of the commissioners in 1848. He emphasised that the government policy of placing costs of relief on local rates lay at the heart of the continued enforcement of tough relief qualifications for applicants. He also stated that making landlords responsible for payment of the rates of all holdings valued at £4 or under ‘served as a major inducement to the mass eviction of bankrupt smallholders’.⁷¹ From this time on, discussion of Gregory would take on a much more critical note. In 1989 there appeared a reprint of O’Rourke’s 1875 volume, which had received little attention from historians until this point. The 1990s saw a great rise in interest in the Famine due to 150-year anniversaries. Such new interest led to a concern among some to attribute blame for the Famine and its effects. Seen as an uncaring ‘Anglo-Irish’ landlord, Gregory now emerged as a major villain of the crisis, in spite of evidence to the contrary.

In 1995, in a Thomas Davis lecture on evictions during the famine, James Donnelly emphasised what he saw as the dire consequences of the quarter acre clause, in particular denouncing William Gregory.⁷² He stated how in the Commons, Gregory had used language that was ‘dismissive and contemptuous’, and quoted from the *Hansard* report of his speech, apparently stating that he ‘did

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

⁷⁰ Mary E. Daly, *The famine in Ireland* (Dundalk, 1986), pp 94–5.

⁷¹ James S. Donnelly jr., ‘The administration of relief, 1847–51’ in W. E. Vaughan (ed.), *A new history of Ireland, v: Ireland under the union, i, 1801–70* (Oxford, 1989), pp 317, 323–7.

⁷² James S. Donnelly jr., ‘Mass eviction and the great famine: the clearances revisited’ in Cathal Póirtéir (ed.), *The great Irish famine* (Cork, 1995), pp 159–60.

not see of what use such small farmers could possibly be'. He then declared that 'throughout the Famine years the Gregory clause or "Gregoryism" became a byword for the worst miseries of the disaster – eviction, exile, disease and death'. He next quoted Canon John O'Rourke's remarks of 1875, as reprinted in 1989, denouncing the Gregory clause and urging that Gregory's words and clause should be 'forever remembered by the descendants of the slaughtered and expatriate small farmers of Ireland'. In 2001 Donnelly brought together in a new book a number of his earlier essays on the Famine and added these comments about Gregory.⁷³ The effect of Gregory's clause was also investigated by Christine Kinealy in several publications. In 1994 she wrote that the 1847 poor law relief act 'contributed to an increase in the number of evictions, most notably through the introduction of the controversial quarter-acre clause'. Nonetheless, she also declared: 'The main incentive for landlords to evict tenants was to avoid liability for the full amount of poor rate which was on all holdings valued at under £4'.⁷⁴ In 1997, however, she described the Gregory clause as 'the most controversial and callous aspect' of the poor law act, reprinted from O'Rourke the supposed words of Gregory of 1847 that 'he did not see of what use such small farmers could possibly be' and then quoted O'Rourke's remark about the clause that 'a more complete engine for the slaughter and expatriation of a people was never designed'.⁷⁵

The early years of the twenty-first century saw the publication of several works by the writer Colm Tóibín which discussed William Gregory. In 2001 he referred to the historians Donnelly and Kinealy to attribute the rise in evictions to the Gregory clause, and made no mention of the 1843 act.⁷⁶ He quoted from O'Rourke's exhortations for people never to forget Gregory's clause and words. Tóibín returned to the subject of Gregory and his clause in a short book, *Lady Gregory's toothbrush* (Dublin, 2002), which was publicised and reviewed very widely, including an article on the subject by Tóibín in *The New York Review of Books*.⁷⁷ This book was concerned primarily with Lady Gregory but a section dealt with William Gregory. Tóibín acknowledged Gregory as a good landlord but attacked his role in the Famine. Again he criticised the quarter acre clause but made no reference to the more important 1843 £4 rating clause. Once more he repeated the condemnatory words of O'Rourke. In one paragraph Tóibín states that the Gregory clause 'radically reduced the number of small tenants'. This remark is followed immediately by several sentences which declared that between 1845 and 1855 two million people left Ireland and that at the same time the cottier class virtually disappeared.⁷⁸ These comments seem to attribute major responsibility to Gregory for the total changes throughout the entire period. By this stage, Gregory had now emerged as one of the chief villains, or, perhaps even, *the* chief villain, during the Famine. Four books published in 2012 on the

⁷³ Donnelly, *Great potato famine*, p.111.

⁷⁴ Christine Kinealy, *This great calamity: the Irish famine, 1845–1852* (Dublin, 1994) pp 213–23.

⁷⁵ Christine Kinealy, *A death dealing famine: the great hunger in Ireland* (London, 1997) pp 123–4.

⁷⁶ Colm Tóibín and Diarmaid Ferriter, *The Irish famine* (2001, London, 2004 edn), pp 3–5.

⁷⁷ *The New York Review of Books*, 9 Aug. 2001.

⁷⁸ Tóibín, *Lady Gregory's toothbrush*, pp 26–32.

Famine concur with this very critical view of Gregory.⁷⁹ One author stated that 29 March 1847, when the Gregory clause was passed by parliament, 'was the night Mr Gregory's name entered Irish history as a curse' while another described the Gregory clause as 'one of the most draconian measures ever passed by a British parliament'.⁸⁰

V

Some final comments on Gregory can be made. From the evidence gathered it seems reasonable to argue that William Gregory was no *villain*. He was an honourable individual who had no intention of inflicting harm on Irish small farmers or anyone else. He introduced his quarter acre clause in an effort to control the costs of the new government poor law reforms of 1847 which he had strongly opposed, viewing famine relief as the responsibility of central government and not Irish ratepayers who had only limited resources. No doubt it was in the interest of Gregory and other landlords to oppose such rates, but he was aware that the country had not the local means to meet the cost of extensive relief. Events over the next few years would prove the complete inadequacy of such an approach, when, in many parts of Ireland, especially in the west, the poor law system would collapse or fail to work effectively. At a personal level, during the Famine, Gregory accepted in full his responsibilities as a landlord towards his tenants and as a ratepayer. It is not correct to say that Gregory introduced this clause to clear people from the land. At the time he did not appreciate its consequences. Remarkably, it seems that only one candidate in the entire west of Ireland at the August 1847 general election, Charles O'Connell, warned of the potential danger of Gregory's clause; afterwards, his house was 'maliciously demolished' because of his political stance. Nonetheless, the harm caused by Gregory's clause must be acknowledged. Its effect, in the deteriorating situation, post-August 1847, as Gregory admitted, was 'severe', and led to many people losing their lives or homes. It needs to be pointed out, however, that the blame which Gregory must bear for his actions in this matter has been greatly exaggerated by other evictions and clearances being wrongly attributed to him, both before and after the enactment of this clause.

He was, in fact, a *victim* of the Famine, not only because he lost his father to famine fever as he sought to help his tenants, but also because his reputation was greatly maligned, due to the misquoting of his words and the blaming of him for matters unrelated to his clause. The central role attributed to him diverted criticism of the actions of others, in particular John Mitchel and Archbishop John MacHale, two lifelong critics of Gregory after 1847. It can be argued that what caused equal or even more harm post-1847 than the Gregory clause was that clause in the 1843 poor law act, which placed payment of rates on those holdings

⁷⁹ John Crowley, William J. Smyth and Mike Murphy (eds), *Atlas of the great Irish famine* (Cork, 2012); T. P. Coogan, *The famine plot: England's role in Ireland's greatest tragedy* (Basingstoke, 2012); Enda Delaney, *The curse of reason: the great Irish famine* (Dublin, 2012); John Kelly, *The graves are walking: the history of the great Irish famine* (London, 2012).

⁸⁰ Kelly, *Graves are walking*, p. 250; Delaney, *Curse of reason*, p. 173.

valued at £4 or under on landlords, so leading to many evictions. When tenants could no longer pay rents, but landlords remained liable for rates, evictions followed. Some modern historians have acknowledged the impact of this clause, but there has been little examination of how it came to be introduced, apart from brief comments by L. J. McCaffrey in 1966 and Peter Gray in 2009.⁸¹ Popular protest in the years 1842–3, from various sources, played an important part in altering the poor law system in 1843, including the introduction of this clause. The Young Irelanders, through their journal, *The Nation*, had been strong proponents of change to the poor law, arguing that an obligation on landlords to pay the rates of the poorest tenants would make them face the reality of poverty in Ireland.⁸² John Mitchel became a contributor to the journal in early 1843. Archbishop John McHale gave enthusiastic public support in January 1843 to measures to lift the burden of taxation from the poorest ratepayers.⁸³ The later writings of Mitchel and O'Rourke served to draw exaggerated and emotive attention to Gregory's clause, thus providing a smokescreen for the 1843 clause, which neither mentioned. Of course, the effects of this clause, as they later materialised so harmfully, were neither appreciated nor intended by its supporters in 1842–3, but this was equally true of Gregory's clause.

In other ways, Gregory is deserving of praise and can be regarded as a *prophet*. It was greatly to Gregory's credit that he sought to modify the 1847 poor law reforms, while most other Irish M.Ps failed to effectively challenge the government or to come up with constructive ideas to tackle the crisis (William Smith O'Brien was another exception). In fact, it is remarkable that in all the various debates in parliament during 1847 and at the 1847 August general election, on issues such as the shipping laws, or the closure of soup kitchens, Irish politicians failed to put forward good proposals to improve the situation in Ireland.⁸⁴ In the vote on Gregory's clause in parliament on 28 March 1847, as mentioned, only two M.P.s out of 105 (plus another Irish M.P. from an English constituency) voted against the measure, while another twenty-six Irish M.P.s supported it. Later, John Mitchel responded to the accusation that the repeal M.P.s were lacking in useful proposals with the simple retort that: 'Indeed, they had nothing to propose but repeal', which to him was sufficient.⁸⁵ Short term measures, however, such as extra food depots or soup kitchens, could have improved things for many.

In fact, Mitchel, who was very critical of others, was himself incapable of sensible ideas or effectively organising schemes to assist famine victims. As Mary Daly has pointed out: 'Mitchel's subsequent savage indictment of British government policy conceals the fact that he and his colleagues offered no workable alternative at the time.'⁸⁶ Cecil Woodham-Smith was even blunter about Mitchel: 'He was wildly unpractical, he was obstinate, he did not foresee

⁸¹ L. J. McCaffrey, *Daniel O'Connell and the repeal year* (Lexington, Kentucky, 1996), pp 20–37; Peter Gray, *The making of the Irish poor law, 1815–43* (Manchester, 2009), pp 324–31.

⁸² McCaffrey, *Daniel O'Connell and the repeal year*, p. 36; *Nation*, 4 Feb. 1843.

⁸³ *Tuam Herald*, 21 Jan. 1843.

⁸⁴ In the case of the elections see Walker, 'Politicians, elections and catastrophe', pp 29–33.

⁸⁵ Mitchel, *Last conquest*, p. 142.

⁸⁶ Daly, *Irish famine*, p. 85.

the consequences of his actions, he did not merely lack organizing ability, he regarded method, organisation and system with lofty contempt.⁸⁷ At least twenty-nine-year-old Gregory did try to take action and he understood clearly that the idea that Irish ratepayers, rather than central sources, could fund a major measure of Irish famine relief in 1847 was fatally flawed. On this vital point, as James Donnelly has said: 'British policy was terribly misguided.'⁸⁸ In 1847 Gregory and some other Irish conservative landlord M.P.s criticised strongly the official approach, unlike most of their fellow liberal and repeal Irish M.P.s, who believed that a liberal government at Westminster was preferable, over a range of other issues, to a conservative one, and so did not take an active, critical role against the government. Efforts in 1847 to create a united front among the 105 Irish M.P.s at Westminster to challenge government policies came to nothing.

The main point in favour of Gregory, however, relates to his proposals about assisted emigration. Cormac Ó Gráda has commented: 'Mass emigration, properly subsidized and regulated, would ...have reduced mortality.'⁸⁹ Gregory was responsible for not only the quarter acre clause, but also for another clause to allow poor law unions to assist emigration. Unfortunately, this second clause was little availed of, because of lack of local resources, and by 1850 only 871 persons had benefited from the scheme.⁹⁰ Also, Gregory was one of three principal backers behind a proposed major scheme of assisted emigration to specially purchased land in Canada. The government failed to accept the idea. It was denounced strongly by repeal and Catholic sources as an encouragement for people to leave Ireland. To counter likely criticism, one of the three backers, the repealer M. J. O'Connell, was a Catholic and their proposals included the provision of Catholic chaplains for the emigrants, but to no avail. A meeting of Catholic clergy in the Tuam diocese, headed by Archbishop John MacHale, strongly condemned the proposals.⁹¹ The *Nation* was also very critical, describing colonisation as a new form of 'To hell or Connaught' – 'To Canada or the grave'.⁹² Mitchel in his 1861 book would repeat such criticisms.⁹³ Over the following eight years, nonetheless, it has been reckoned that somewhere near a million people emigrated from Ireland, and virtually all without state assistance or adequate regulation. This scheme, or an adapted form of it, would have helped here enormously. Ó Gráda has written: 'the assisted migration of even one hundred thousand destitute famine victims in 1847–48 would almost certainly have saved thousands of lives in Ireland itself.'⁹⁴

The scheme could have helped also when the emigrants arrived at their destination. Most went to the United States where they often faced great poverty and exploitation. Concerning Boston, Cecil Woodham-Smith observed: 'By a curious piece of reasoning, the Irish starving in Ireland were regarded as unfortunate victims, to be generously helped, while the same Irish, having crossed

⁸⁷ Woodham-Smith, *Great hunger*, p. 333.

⁸⁸ Donnelly, *Great Irish potato famine*, p. 116.

⁸⁹ Cormac Ó Gráda, *Great Irish famine* (London, 1989), p. 55.

⁹⁰ *Third annual report of the commissioners for administering the laws for relief of the poor in Ireland*, H.C.1850, xxvii, p. 471.

⁹¹ Moran, *Sending out Ireland's poor*, p. 75

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 74.

⁹³ Mitchel, *Last conquest*, pp 139–40.

⁹⁴ Cormac Ó Gráda, *Black '47 and beyond: the great Irish famine in history, economy and memory* (Princeton, 1999), p. 121.

the Atlantic to starve in Boston, were described as the scourings of Europe and resented as an intolerable burden to the taxpayer.⁹⁵ This 1847 proposal for assisted emigration was not a new idea. In 1843, a Catholic Emigration Society had been established in Ireland under the patronage of Daniel O'Connell, several Catholic bishops, and M. J. O'Connell, one of the other backers of the later scheme, to help Irish emigrants to move to land settlements, as advertised in the *Nation* in 1843, away from large American cities, but this came to little.⁹⁶ The much more extensive proposal of 1847 by Godley, Gregory and O'Connell never materialised, thanks to the strong opposition within Ireland and a negative government response, and so badly needed assistance was not provided at the North American side. Thirty years later, John Ireland, Catholic bishop of St Paul, Minnesota, revived the idea of establishing rural colonies in America for Catholic Irish emigrants to rescue them from the evils of the cities, a scheme not unlike that proposed by Gregory in 1847, as was pointed out in the press in 1881.⁹⁷ Efforts along these lines in the late 1840s could well have made a material difference for many.

It is now possible to establish a more authentic view of William Gregory and his role in the Famine. His aim was to prevent abuse and to control the cost of the new welfare arrangements established in Ireland in the first half of 1847. Originally, as we can tell from the lack of response of candidates to his clause at the August 1847 general election, few people understood the potential dangers of his amendment. In the event, when the situation deteriorated again after August, the Gregory clause did have very damaging effects, which Gregory acknowledged. At the same time, other factors, such as the insistence of the government that famine relief should be funded from local resources and the consequences of the 1843 £4 rating clause, were also extremely significant. Most people understood this, which helps to explain why he could later pursue a successful career as a popular politician in County Galway, where the effects of the Famine had been keenly felt. The fact that there was no criticism of him after his death shows again that he was not widely seen as someone whom people blamed for the worst effects of the Famine. Some, such as John Mitchel and Archbishop MacHale, did not forgive him for his role, but then they and their allies had also supported a significant measure which proved harmful (the 1843 clause) and they failed to support his efforts to ameliorate conditions (assisted emigration). It can be argued that he became a scapegoat to hide their failings. More recently, Gregory has again come in for unfair comment. Once more this criticism has served to deflect analysis of the actions or inactions during the Famine of other leading Irish figures, including Mitchel and MacHale, who could have done more. When we look at Gregory's comments and efforts, such as his proposals for assisted emigration, it seems reasonable to give him credit as a caring and prophetic figure.⁹⁸

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⁹⁵ Woodham-Smith, *Great hunger*, pp 247–8.

⁹⁶ Moran, *Sending out Ireland's poor*, p. 52.

⁹⁷ *Times*, 31 Dec. 1881.

⁹⁸ The author gratefully acknowledges financial assistance from the British Academy to visit Gregory archives in Atlanta and Oxford.