



‘Information from which money can be made is what is required’: William Blackwoods and the Irish Ordnance Memoir Commission of 1843–4

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ABSTRACT. *The Irish Ordnance memoir scheme attempted to produce wide-ranging ‘statistical’ memoirs on a national basis, to accompany the large-scale (six-inch) mapping of the country by the Irish Ordnance Survey. Dating to the early 1830s, the memoir scheme had a stop-start existence and only published a specimen account for the parish of Templemore, County Londonderry (1837). But the scheme’s overall aims of economic improvement and cultural revival attracted considerable support from Irish society and the Irish press. Public calls for resumption after memoir activity was stopped in 1840 led to an investigatory commission of 1843–4, appointed by the prime minister, Sir Robert Peel, but the commission’s favourable findings were then disputed by him, primarily on grounds of cost. This article examines the impact of the Edinburgh publishing house of William Blackwoods on the memoir commission. The first section investigates the influence of Scottish voluntarism on the commission, while the second assesses the impact of the firm on the emerging publication proposals in the immediate aftermath of the report. The article argues that the memoir scheme was not a victim of British antipathy but expired from a failure of the principals, including Blackwoods, to agree publishing terms, and both assesses and contextualises the scheme’s demise from this adjusted perspective.*

The British government’s decision of 1824–5 to map Ireland on the large (six-inch) scale was a significant one. This demanding task fell to the Ordnance Survey — the military mapping department for Ireland and Britain — and several hundred engineers, surveyors and rank-and-file soldiers were sent over from Britain to begin the work. In addition to improving the country’s defences, the Survey’s activities in Ireland were seen by contemporaries as progressive. Not only did the Ordnance personnel eventually produce the first complete set of large-scale maps in the United Kingdom, they also played an important role in supporting a separate boundary survey, designed to effect the long-awaited reform of local taxation in Ireland. Individually, the officers of the Ordnance were frequently multi-talented individuals with a keen interest in wider social affairs. In particular for present purposes, the head of the Ordnance Survey in Ireland, Colonel Thomas Colby, and his subordinate, Captain Thomas Larcom, felt comprehensive large-scale mapping should be supported by explanatory memoirs, detailing in Domesday Book

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fashion the topography, socio-economic conditions, history and culture of every parish in the land.¹

The manuscript memoirs commenced in 1830, written by officers and increasingly by civilian assistants, but had been stopped by 1840 due to concerns about the perceived drain of memoir work on the rate of mapping and, additionally, that memoir activity had proceeded without the prior approval of the Board of Ordnance and the treasury in London.² These twin fears crystallised with the publication of the specimen *Templemore* memoir report (1837). Although the report sold well, it ran to a voluminous 350 octavo pages, sold at four times the original suggested price of three shillings and prompted fears of sectarian division due to its controversial historical content.³

But the memoirs commanded widespread support among Ireland's press and political classes, including Protestants and Catholics, nationalists and unionists, peers, M.P.s and scientific and cultural organisations, since the scheme offered the possibility of genuine socio-economic improvement and more informed policy making, plus a reinvigorated sense of Irish identity. Consequently, supporters (memorialists) pressed assiduously for memoir resumption, albeit on a slimmed-down basis.⁴ However, other influences were also at play in inducing the prime minister, Sir Robert Peel, to grant an investigative parliamentary memoir commission in June 1843. One was the downturn in Irish trade and agriculture after 1839. The summer of pro-repeal O'Connellism in 1843 and its 'monster meetings' was of even greater urgency, including a crowd estimated at 300,000 to 400,000 at Mallow alone on 11 June, with repeal additionally threatening a corrosive overspill into mainland Britain.⁵

Peel's cabinet hoped to contain repeal by non-violent means, and two meetings of Irish nobles and M.P.s in June, headed by Lord Downshire, similarly urged not only a robust defence of the Anglo-Irish union but the recommencement of the memoir scheme as well, to help mollify Irish opinion. Peel's ignorance of the memoir scheme, his suggestion of a commission rather than a Commons committee to speed up specialist testimony and the ability of the commissioners to pack the witness list with prominent supporters, reinforce the view of the commission as a conciliatory offering by Peel, designed to deflect public attention away from

¹ The quotation in the title is from: *Report of the commissioners appointed to inquire into the facts relating to the ordnance memoir of Ireland, together with the minutes of evidence, appendix and report*, pp iii, 64, 79, H.C. 1844 (527), xxx, 259 (henceforth *O.M.R.*).

² The main secondary works are: J. H. Andrews, *A paper landscape: the Ordnance Survey in nineteenth-century Ireland* (2nd ed., Dublin, 2002), especially pp 144–79; G. M. Doherty, *The Irish Ordnance Survey: history, culture and memory* (Dublin, 2004); Patrick McWilliams, 'The Ordnance memoir of Ireland: origins, progress and decline' (Ph.D. thesis, Queen's University, Belfast, 2005).

³ [T. F.] Colby, *Memoir of the city and north western liberties of Londonderry: parish of Templemore* (Dublin, 1837); Andrews, *Paper landscape*, pp 157–60.

⁴ *O.M.R.*, pp 69–70; Adare to Larcom, 23 June 1843 (N.L.I., Larcom papers, MS 7553) [all N.L.I. references henceforth are to the Larcom papers].

⁵ Peel to Queen Victoria, 11 July 1843 (B.L., Peel papers, Add. MS 4037, f. 29) [all B.L. references henceforth are to Peel's papers]; Colby to Larcom, 12 July 1843 (N.L.I., MS 7553); P. M. Geoghegan, *Liberator: the life and death of Daniel O'Connell, 1830–1847* (Dublin, 2010), pp 138–41; Cormac Ó Gráda, *Ireland: a new economic history, 1780–1939* (Oxford, 1994), pp 166–7.

these deeply-felt grievances.⁶ His conciliatory attitude had the guarded support of the lord lieutenant, Earl de Grey, who, though doubtful if the scheme could achieve its aims, believed the Ordnance staff was the best means of attempting it.⁷

This article sets out to examine the publishing history of the memoir scheme in the aftermath of the commission, that is, during 1843–4. This is an aspect of the memoir scheme's history that has received scant attention from historians, despite being a critical part of its failure to proceed, largely over the question of costs. The focus on the Edinburgh publishing house of William Blackwood & Sons (hereafter Blackwoods) derives from Peel's attraction to voluntary or unpaid contributions, which formed the basis of Blackwoods' contemporaneous publication, the *New statistical account of Scotland* (1834–45).⁸ The article argues that Blackwoods became Peel's publisher of choice and that Blackwoods' commercial bias undermined the commission's assumption the memoirs should be state-funded.

Peel's direct role in the memoir affair is also examined. Although sections of the contemporary Irish press were convinced that Peel's alleged anti-Irishness lay behind the memoir scheme's expiry, the article shows that Peel and his proxy, John Young, M.P., suggested alternative publication proposals. The proposals included an invitation to memorial supporters to contribute to the costs of the memoirs' historical and antiquarian sections, but the memorialists' disinclination to do so proved to be a major stumbling-block to the London government's willingness to fund the memoir project in full. The article concludes that the memoir scheme's demise primarily foundered on the inability of both the London government and the memorialists to agree on a compromise publishing plan.

I

The commission formally ran from June 1843 to the end of February 1844, when its report from November was laid before parliament, but its negotiations continued for much longer, signifying Peel's dissatisfaction with its findings. The three commissioners were all Tory M.P.s: John Young, the chair, who was to become Peel's chief whip in 1844, was Irish member for Cavan; Lord Adare, representing Glamorganshire, was the leading memoir revivalist; and Henry Boldero was an English member of the Board of Ordnance and M.P. for Chippenham. The very capable Young, described as the lord lieutenant's 'handy man', 'well disposed' to the memorial and regarded by Peel as one of the ablest Irish Tories, was largely in sympathy with Adare, whereas Boldero was there to defend the Ordnance's interests.⁹

⁶ Peel to Prince Albert, 11 June 1843 (B.L., Add. MS 40436); Lord Downshire to Peel, 19 June 1843 (B.L., Add. MS 40530, ff 128–32); Adare to Larcom, 29 June 1843 (N.L.I., MS 7553).

⁷ De Grey to Peel, 3 July 1843 (B.L., Add. MS 40478, ff 101–02).

⁸ Sir John Sinclair, *Statistical account of Scotland* (21 vols, Edinburgh, 1791–9), ed. D. J. Withrington and I. R. Grant (rev. and repr., 20 vols, Wakefield, 1973–83). For the publication history of the *N.S.A.*, 1834–45, see J. A. Gibson, 'The New Statistical Account of Scotland: correct publication dates of the parish accounts' in *Scottish Naturalist*, cvii (1995), pp 3–52. Digitised versions of both sets of accounts, plus supplementary resources, are available via the Statistical Accounts of Scotland website, (www.edina.ac.uk/stat-acc-scot) (accessed 27 June 2023).

⁹ Larcom to [Thomas Robinson], June and July 1843 (N.L.I., MS 7545); Norman Gash, *Sir Robert Peel: the life of Sir Robert Peel after 1830* (2nd ed., London, 1986), pp 394–5.

Scottish influence on the memoir commission’s remit and outcome was apparent from the outset. Blackwoods’ involvement derived from article ix of Peel’s commissioning memorandum of 30 June, which required the commissioners to investigate the methodology, principles and modest costs of the Scottish statistical accounts for potential application to Ireland, as further discussed below.¹⁰ Who first suggested the firm’s appearance is uncertain. One possibility is Alexander Pringle of Whytbank and Yair, M.P., a Scot and Conservative whip, who effected John Blackwood’s introduction to Young; another is Young himself, who seems to have been known to the firm before the commission began.¹¹ Although no one from Blackwoods appeared in the witness list in Peel’s memorandum, this was probably due to uncertainty over who would appear for the firm. Blackwoods’ opening of a London branch during 1840 made John, the junior partner there, relatively accessible, but the controlling partners were his elder siblings, Alexander and Robert, in Edinburgh.¹²

The impression that Blackwoods was a last-minute attendee is reinforced by the fact that John Blackwood recognised none of the commissioners who took his evidence in London on 25 July.¹³ Furthermore, it is difficult to identify why the firm might campaign for inclusion on commercial grounds. Even if Blackwoods knew anything about William Shaw Mason’s ill-fated series, *A statistical account, or parochial survey of Ireland* (3 vols, Dublin, 1814–19) — patronised by Peel as chief secretary and mentored by Sir John Sinclair, compiler of the ‘*Old*’ *Statistical account of Scotland (O.S.A.)* of 1791–9 — its early termination was hardly an inspiration for other publishers to follow.¹⁴ Nor did there seem to be any need for anyone else, as Ordnance publications in Ireland, including the trial *Templemore* report, were very ably handled from 1833 by Hodges & Smith of Dublin, Ireland’s quasi-national academic and legal bookseller.¹⁵

John Blackwood’s testimony of 25 July was supplemented by a statement by John Gordon, the editor in Edinburgh of the *N.S.A.*, dated 2 August, but their evidence, if somewhat anodyne, by implication contradicted the memorialists’ appetite for state-funded memoir collection and publication. They characterised the *N.S.A.* as a charitable and voluntary affair, explicitly based on the *O.S.A.*, whose putative profits were to be shared with a national charity, the Society for the Benefit of the Sons and Daughters of the Kirk. Despite the limited nature of this evidence, the Scottish and Irish accounts shared certain similarities. They were broad-ranging, proceeded via survey by questionnaire and primarily focussed on socio-economic improvement, and if Peel dismissed the ‘very elaborate’ expense of *Templemore*, similarly, publication by parish was not originally intended by Sinclair.¹⁶

¹⁰ *O.M.R.*, p. iii.

¹¹ Robert Blackwood (R. B.) to Alexander Blackwood (A. B.), 21 May 1843 (National Library of Scotland, Blackwood papers, MS 4065, f. 63); John Blackwood (J. B.) to A. B., 26 July 1843 (N.L.S., MS 4064, ff 122–3) [all N.L.S. references henceforth are to the Blackwood papers].

¹² David Finkelstein, *The house of Blackwood: author-publisher relations in the Victorian era* (University Park, PA, 2003), p. 10.

¹³ J.B. to A.B., 25 July 1843 (N.L.S., MS 4064, f. 120).

¹⁴ William Shaw Mason (ed.), *A statistical account, or parochial survey of Ireland* (3 vols, Dublin, 1814–19), i, pp v–vi, viii–ix; *ibid.*, ii, p. i; *ibid.*, iii, pp viii–xiv.

¹⁵ George Smith to Larcom, 7 Nov. 1837 (N.L.I., MS 7552); Tony Farnar, *The history of Irish book publishing* (Stroud, 2018), pp 41–2.

¹⁶ *O.M.R.*, pp iv, 59, 79–80; ‘Sir John Sinclair’ in *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*, xlii (1837), p. 11.

Even so, the commission gave the Scottish approach short shrift. Clerical voluntarism was seen as out-of-date, too individualistic and without scientific credibility, collectively amounting to a summary rejection of the values of Sinclair, who had aspired to be chief secretary of Ireland in 1824, intriguingly the year of Thomas Colby's appointment there.¹⁷ Commission witnesses were adamant that despite some improvement in the Church of Ireland's fortunes since Shaw Mason's time, its clergymen were overworked, lacked access to libraries and, since they predominantly did not speak Irish, had insufficient knowledge of country parishes. Furthermore, it was argued that the church, which in 1840 served under ten per cent of Ireland's population in a fractious mix of Anglicans, Presbyterians and Roman Catholics, could never produce a unified set of voluntary reports, not least since the Roman Catholic priesthood was ministering to a burgeoning Irish population. Learned individuals and associations were similarly dismissed by the commission, since they were few in number, mainly Dublin-based, and had shallow pockets and a questionable output, with even the antiquarian proceedings of the venerable, pro-memorial Royal Irish Academy rejected by the antiquarian, George Petrie, in evidence to the commission as 'almost worse than useless'.¹⁸

Instead, memoir supporters rightly stressed the superiority of the Ordnance's resources over voluntarism as a collecting force. Government men, money and time, increasingly aided by paid civilian assistants, allowed extensive fieldwork, teamworking and specialisation to develop as prominent features of a collaborative editorial approach. Meanwhile, the evidence-based work of Petrie's topographical department hallmarked a new, national confidence in the importance of early Irish history.¹⁹ But qualitatively, it was fallaciously simplistic for memorialists to assume that since the Ordnance's maps were excellent, the memoirs necessarily would be too. Survey staff, whether military or civilian, had no specific qualifications to write topographical memoirs. Similarly, the Commission was probably wrong to dismiss voluntary effort almost completely. In comparison, writers have stressed its beneficial impact on the Scottish accounts.²⁰ To instance, a spot-check of Antrim, the best-covered county along with Londonderry, reveals a wide variation in returns, ranging from the minuscule Ballymyre or Kilclooney to the much larger description of Carmonney, accounts which parallel the unevenness of the Scottish picture, with the essential caveat that many Irish parish returns were incomplete or unedited.²¹

Three other qualitative features of Scottish voluntarism deserve consideration. Both the *O.S.A.* and the *N.S.A.* achieved national coverage of over 900 parishes; in Ireland, by contrast, only some 262 parish memoirs were 'more or less complete' by 1843, with very little coverage for the south and only *Templemore* in print. In

¹⁷ Rosalind Mitchison, *Agricultural Sir John: the life of Sir John Sinclair of Ulster* (London, 1962), p. 255.

¹⁸ *O.M.R.*, pp ix, 18, 21, 24, 26, 38, 42, 51, 54, 56, 64, 80; J. H. Murphy, *Ireland: a social, cultural and literary history, 1791–1891* (Dublin, 2003), pp 66, 70.

¹⁹ Doherty, *Irish Ordnance Survey*, pp 78–86, 98–112; McWilliams, 'Ordnance Survey memoir', pp 215–25.

²⁰ Colby, *Templemore*, preliminary notice, p. 7; Ian Hill, 'The origins of the New Statistical Account of Scotland' in *Scottish Historical Review*, xcvi (2017), p. 177; C. W. J. Withers, *Geography, science and national identity: Scotland since 1520* (Cambridge, 2001), pp 147–8.

²¹ Angélique Day and Patrick McWilliams (eds), *Ordnance Survey memoirs of Ireland* (Belfast and Dublin): i, *Parishes of County Armagh, 1835–8* (1990), pp 20, 51; ii, *Parishes of County Antrim 1838–9* (1990), pp 34–105.

addition, if the Scottish system suffered from dependency on clerical goodwill, the Irish one arguably suffered from excessive ambition. Thomas Larcom's questionnaire of c.1832 and its contextual detail, although influenced by the *N.S.A.*'s heads of enquiry from 1831, ran to a gargantuan thirty-seven pages (but was summarily condensed into one page in the commission's report). Conversely, the Scottish procedure was a residual one, based on asterisking pre-selected core questions as requisite, allowing a basic degree of uniformity to emerge, which may well have commended itself to Peel's cost-conscious approach.²² Moreover, both the *N.S.A.* and *O.S.A.* at least strove, if unsuccessfully, to be a socio-economic snapshot of their country within one to two years, to produce comparability of information, a desirable outcome also emphasised by commission witnesses. Larcom argued that memoirs were progressive, not simultaneous, designed to accommodate the mapping as it moved around the country, but the logical consequence of 'progressiveness' over a drawn-out period was that at best memoir comparability would have been between counties, and possibly provinces, rather than across the country as a whole.²³

Not all these contrasts emerged as clearly as they might have, due to the commissioners' overwhelming support for Larcom. But it was far harder for them to dismiss the cost implications of voluntaryism, because Peel's prime focus was on cost reduction, involving memoirs which were free from 'many points of merely local and temporary interest'. Crucially, Colby's projected memoir scheme costs of £50,000 (which increased to £60,000 in the published report) were chimerical. Larcom's estimate for completing County Londonderry had been £1,750 in 1840 and Colby's general estimate was essentially Larcom's baseline writ large across the other thirty-one Irish counties. Larcom was also honest enough to admit that an anticipated completion period of ten to twelve years was highly problematic, principally due to the lack of trained personnel to assist him.²⁴ Furthermore, Larcom acknowledged that his £50,000 figure excluded printing or publishing costs. As these had been £932 for *Templemore*, excluding illustrations, and £1,647 for Captain Portlock's report on the geology of Londonderry, another £30,000 of costs might easily have been added on a pro rata basis at the lower rate. Finally, in terms of value for money, Peel was surely right to question what the memoir had achieved. The report was quite clear that little progress had been made with geology and natural history, that statistics would have to be re-done and that even the copious but contentious areas of history and antiquities, normally the preserve of private publishing, would require substantial additions.²⁵

By contrast, the Scottish parish accounts were low-cost units of production, with Blackwoods only allowing £30 as expenses for each number of the founding part-work edition, whose unit production cost, they informed John Cummings, their Dublin agent, averaged only £150. In addition, there was virtually no state involvement. The publication ran on commercial lines, based on 700 subscribers for a normal print run of 1,250 copies, with Blackwoods' anticipation of a modest return

²² *O.M.R.*, pp x, 2–4, 79–87; Larcom's survey questionnaire (1832) (N.L.I., MS 7550); Doherty, *Irish Ordnance Survey*, p. 38; Hill, 'Origins of the *N.S.A.*', pp 175–6.

²³ *O.M.R.*, pp 6, 49, 55; Withrington and Grant, *O.S.A.*, i, pp 48–95; Hill, 'Origins of the *N.S.A.*', pp 181–2.

²⁴ *O.M.R.*, pp iv, xiv–xv, 40, 60–1, 65, 71; Larcom to Colby, 27 Jan. 1843 (N.L.I., MS 7553); Andrews, *Paper landscape*, p. 165.

²⁵ *O.M.R.*, pp v–viii, 6, 71.

over time echoing the memorial testimony of George Smith, the Dublin publisher.²⁶ In addition, historical material was included in the *N.S.A.* primarily to boost sales, whereas in the memoirs it constituted the bulk of the topographical matter collected and, therefore, looked like an expensive re-evaluation of Ireland's past.²⁷ In reality, the firm dissembled over costs for reasons of commercial confidentiality due to its growing losses with the *N.S.A.* (£2,018 by mid-1843 for the original partwork series), but this position, paradoxically, probably only reinforced the impression of the firm's financial nous and the need in Peel's view for an experienced commercial publisher for the Irish memoir series to minimise costs and maximise sales.²⁸

Underlying the vexing issue of cost was the threat of cessation. Larcom declared that memoir activity had been halted over the issue of authority by the Board of Ordnance, which also dissociated itself in the report from conducting the topographical survey.²⁹ Colby asserted from the start of his appointment to Ireland that he had a free hand in terms of his mapping activities, but he interpreted his remit broadly and also on occasion unwisely ignored his departmental chiefs in London. The Smyth report of 1828 had fired an early warning shot by temporarily shutting down his geological enquiries. Despite this setback and with Colby's approval, Larcom's massive, socio-economic questionnaire of c.1832 was essentially a non-mapping initiative and no mere sideline but a major extension of the Survey's work, one complicated in Larcom's case by zeal bordering on intransigence.³⁰ Long before Peel's administration was inaugurated in 1841, these activities were being heavily criticised by departmental and Whig superiors in London and Dublin. The critics included the highly able 'Scottish Hibernophile', Thomas Drummond, Irish under-secretary (1835–40); the influential, pro-mapping chancellor of the exchequer (1835–9), Thomas Spring Rice, who had originally authorised *Templemore*; and the implacably-opposed Sir Frederick Mulcaster, the Ordnance's inspector-general of fortifications.³¹

The *N.S.A.* by contrast was a model of legitimacy, since its schemata neatly side-stepped the issue of state involvement by relying on a triple alliance between a commercial interest (Blackwoods), a national institution (the Church of Scotland) and a philanthropic offshoot (the Society for the Benefit of Sons and Daughters of the Kirk). In practice, the agreement was defective. Blackwoods did not behave well towards the Society, reneging on a debt of almost £500, while a pronouncement of the kirk's general assembly was required in 1836 to combat the problem of clerical foot-dragging, but the overall picture presented in the report was of a united and

²⁶ *O.M.R.*, pp x, 64–5, 79–80; Blackwoods to John Cumming, 23 July 1843 (N.L.I., MS 7551).

²⁷ Ian Hill, 'A flawed speculation: the making and unmaking of the *New Statistical Account of Scotland*' in *Journal of the Edinburgh Bibliographical Society*, xiv (2019), p. 42; Andrews, *Paper landscape*, pp 174–5.

²⁸ Blackwoods' publication ledger, 1838–46 (N.L.S., MS 30857, p. 61); J. B. to A. B., 26 July 1843 (N.L.S., MS 4064, ff 122–3); R. B. to J. B., 31 July 1843 (N.L.S., MS 4065, f. 77).

²⁹ *O.M.R.*, pp 59–60; Colby to William Gregory, 4 Dec. 1830 (N.A.I., CSO/RP/1830/1952).

³⁰ Andrews, *Paper landscape*, pp 148–9, 153, 163; McWilliams, 'Ordnance Survey memoir', pp 91–6, 113–21.

³¹ Andrews, *Paper landscape*, pp 160–62; Paul Bew, *Ireland: the politics of enmity* (Oxford, 2009), p. 144; Doherty, *Irish Ordnance Survey*; pp 26–7; McWilliams, 'Ordnance Survey memoir', pp 269–71.

highly effective achievement by Scottish civil society.³² Its voluntary approach also meant that the *N.S.A.* posed no political difficulties in Scotland to the government. This advantage, together with the project's minimal costs, clearly commended the potential of voluntary effort in Ireland to Peel and also underscored a major fault line within the memoir scheme, whose stop-start development had proceeded at departmental discretion, without London's prior approval.³³

These questions posed by the *N.S.A.*, of quality, cost and authority, re-appeared in the commissioners' three main recommendations in their November 1843 report. These comprised: the creation of a topographical memoir under the direction of Larcom in Dublin, covering history and antiquities, alongside a proposed new economic section, all to cost £60,000 over twelve years; a separate geological survey, to cost £15,000 over ten years; and approval for contouring at £10,000 to complete the large-scale maps and provide an information-gathering labour force for the memoirs.³⁴ The report provides incidental evidence that Young and the liberal chief secretary of Ireland, Lord Eliot, shared the supposedly reactionary de Grey's belief that economic concessions to benefit the mass of Catholic Ireland could be a principal means of defusing repeal.³⁵ But from Peel's perspective, these recommendations were highly unsatisfactory. In addition to the topographical survey's significant costs, the commissioners had not recommended an economic or utilitarian survey with a topographical component but rather the reverse in which historical and antiquarian material appeared to dominate. Furthermore, the zealous Larcom would be in charge of an operation that answered to Dublin Castle rather than the Board of Ordnance in London, without even Colby's moderating hand to guide him. Peel clearly regarded the commission as a work in progress and it was in this simmering atmosphere of contention that his discussions with Blackwoods now came to the fore.

II

Ostensibly, the commissioners' report signalled victory for the memorialists. However, Peel's unhappiness with their report ushered in the 'bookseller scheme' instead, which lasted from early March 1844, when the report was first made available to parliament, until mid-July, when Peel made his recommendations in the Commons about it. The phrase was coined by Larcom and described Peel's attempt to implement a scaled-down, more utilitarian scheme, built around commercial sale and subscriptions from Irish grandees as the basis for publication, with the added nuance that eminent authors, like Sir Robert Kane for the economic section, might be paid wholly or partly from sales rather than being salaried.³⁶ Larcom's pithy phraseology made light of Peel's concerns, primarily because he shared the commissioners' main aim of maximising memoir sales via subsidised pricing. Larcom's associated arguments concerning the applicability of economies of

³² Hill, 'A flawed speculation', p. 44.

³³ *O.M.R.*, pp iii-iv.

³⁴ *O.M.R.*, pp xiii-xv.

³⁵ *Dublin Evening Post*, 16 Mar. 1844; Charles Read, 'Peel, De Grey and Irish policy, 1841-44' in *History*, xcix (2014), pp 3, 5-6, 12-18.

³⁶ Robert Kane to John Young, 25 May 1844 (N.L.I., MS 7556); Larcom to [Robinson], 24 July 1844 (N.L.I., MS 7545).

scale as the production of county memoirs speeded up and about the possibility of cross-budget transfers from the geological survey or the map engraving grant to bolster the memoir scheme, were also essentially qualitative arguments, intended to optimise the memoirs' expected public utility. The memorialists' arguments about public utility continued and expanded an intermittent but long tradition of proto-empirical, topographical knowledge-gathering in Ireland, dating back to William Petty and to William Molyneux in the seventeenth century.³⁷

Consequently, although Adare had tasked Larcom in June 1843 with producing a convincing publication plan, the commissioners' report went little towards meeting Peel's desires beyond recommending a volume per county of 400 quarto pages, together with a separate geology survey, perhaps combined with natural history at a provincial level, and a determination not to repeat the excesses of *Templemore*.³⁸ The reduced volume size was the astronomer Thomas Robinson's suggestion, not Larcom's, and the projected timescale of ten to twelve years was probably concocted by Adare and Young, since Larcom, like Colby and Petrie, openly admitted that he could not 'speak very definitely on the subject of time or expense'.³⁹ These recommendations additionally reflected the commissioners' ignorance of, and relative indifference to, commercial publishing.⁴⁰ Not only did the commissioners' report fail to stress enough the ready sale of *Templemore*, it also ignored alternative options to maximise revenue either via thematic memoir sales (natural history, statistics, topography and antiquities, agriculture and industry) or from higher prices aimed at limited, specialised scientific and statistical markets, as variously suggested by Robinson and Henry Warburton, M.P., both memorialists, and by the Stationery Office.⁴¹

John Blackwood was the only publisher who testified in person, with George Smith of Hodges & Smith submitting a testimonial-cum-paeon in support of state-funded statistical works, which he saw as akin to other, nascent state-building activities in Ireland such as the census.⁴² As a tranche of around thirty-five letters and other papers in the National Library of Scotland dated between April and July 1844 shows, it was to Blackwoods, the cost-conscious and voluntarily-minded publisher of the readiest available comparison, the *N.S.A.*, to which Peel (and Young, his willing intermediary) turned for advice. Particular mention here should be made of two draft memoranda from May 1844, possibly begun in April, which supplemented another, more conservative one authored by Gordon, the editor of the *N.S.A.*, dated 21 May. The draft memoranda contain various additions and deletions but offer substantially the same advice, are docquetted as if they had been sent and committed Blackwoods to nothing, so it appears highly likely that they were discussed in some shape or form with Young, given the importance of the case.

³⁷ *O.M.R.*, pp vii–viii, 41–4, 46, 49, 52–3, 59, 61, 65–6, 70–71, 79; Toby Barnard, *Brought to book: print in Ireland, 1680–1784* (Dublin, 2017), pp 30–8, 172–8.

³⁸ For the subsequent fate of the geological survey, see Andrews, *Paper landscape*, pp 175–7.

³⁹ *O.M.R.*, pp vii, ix–x, xiv–xv, 12–13, 16–18, 21–2, 24–8, 30, 40, 60–61; Adare to Larcom, 23 June 1843 (N.L.I., MS 7553); Andrews, *Paper landscape*, pp 65, 72.

⁴⁰ For the parlous state of early nineteenth-century Irish publishing, see Farmar, *Irish book publishing*, pp 35–8; Vincent Kinane, *A brief history of printing and publishing in Ireland* (Dublin, 2002), p. 23.

⁴¹ *O.M.R.*, pp 29–30, 57.

⁴² *O.M.R.*, p. 79; Frances McGee, *The archives of the valuation of Ireland, 1830–1865* (Dublin, 2018), p. 199.

During this period, Young met with the firm at least six times in person, an apparently cordial relationship reflected in John Blackwood's description of him as a 'capital fellow'.⁴³ Three main issues emerged from these discussions: the overall costs of the scheme, how the memoirs might be produced and the choice of publisher. Blackwoods' influence on each of these issues will now be considered in turn.

Blackwoods knew Peel was deterred by 'the very large grant of money asked after so much has been expended'.⁴⁴ Peel's request for a second, commercial opinion was additionally justifiable given the Survey's ongoing practice of providing free maps to government departments, libraries and other institutions in Ireland and Britain. Donations (216,000) exceeded sales (201,000) by 1857 and raised the undiscussed question of whether Ordnance memoirs might follow suit.⁴⁵ Financially, the Blackwood brothers' response was highly critical. The Blackwood partners declared Larcom's estimated production costs of £1,700 per county to be 'excessive' and 'much beyond' what was necessary for a county volume and advised against paying salaries, with payment only to be made for work performed. The firm's commercial utterances were reinforced by the Blackwood brothers' political belief, widely shared by others in Britain, that Ireland's socio-economic and political problems were largely of its own making.⁴⁶ Alexander Blackwood declared in May that the free-spending, pro-memorial lobby were 'Irish rascals [who] want to make the Govt analyse their whole estates & the whole thing is a job.' Similarly, in July John Blackwood suggested that the only solution was for Peel to make a clean sweep of the Irish 'jobbing crew whose intention was to make the government pay for everything'.⁴⁷ Such remarks occur in private correspondence, but it is probable that their tenor would have been repeated to Peel via Young, the chairman of the commission.

The London government's confidence in Blackwoods is amply demonstrated by the fact that the firm was privately asked by Peel via Young on 21 April to review the publishing implications of the commissioners' report.⁴⁸ Despite the allegations that were emerging in the Irish press that Peel was intent on suppressing the memoir, the first aspect of note here is the emergence of government counter proposals for an abridged publication scheme.⁴⁹ Possibly at Young's initial suggestion, Peel and Young's preference changed at this point to a programme of two volumes of 700 pages for each of the four Irish provinces, based on a budget of £15,000. But Blackwoods' May memoranda both premised a county arrangement (including

⁴³ J. B. to R. B., 13 May 1844 (N.L.S., MS 4069, f. 105); John Gordon to A. B., 21 May 1844 (N.L.S., MS 4070, ff 268–9). The draft memoranda are both Apr.-May 1844 (N.L.S., MS 30073, pp 83–6; and MS 30074, ff 49–52).

⁴⁴ J. B. to R. B., 21 Apr. 1844 (N.L.S., MS 4069, ff 94–5).

⁴⁵ P. J. Duffy, 'Ordnance Survey maps and official reports', in J. H. Murphy (ed.), *The Oxford history of the Irish book*, iv: *the Irish book in English, 1800–1891* (Oxford, 2011), p. 560.

⁴⁶ K. T. Hoppen, *Governing Hibernia: British politicians and Ireland, 1800–1921* (Oxford, 2016), pp 88–9; Stiofán Ó Cadhla, *Civilizing Ireland: Ordnance Survey, 1824–1842: ethnography, cartography, translation* (Dublin, 2007), p. 86.

⁴⁷ A. B. to R. B., 16 May 1844 (N.L.S., MS 4068, ff 166–8); J. B. to A. B., 10 July 1844 (N.L.S., MS 4069, f. 14).

⁴⁸ J. B. to A. B., 20, 21 Apr. 1844 (N.L.S., MS 4069, ff 92–5).

⁴⁹ For instance, *Freeman's Journal*, 6 Apr. 1844. *Dublin Weekly Nation*, 6 Apr. 1844 (also widely syndicated).

geology) in the belief that this was still what Peel still wanted. To this end, they proposed seeking supplementary material via voluntary contributions from Irish scientists (with Gordon arguing for clerical contributions as well); seconding geologists from Sir Henry de la Beche's English surveys, based on a suggestion made by Robert Jameson, professor of natural history at Edinburgh University and a member of the *N.S.A.*'s advisory committee; and paying only where necessary for memoir contributions received.⁵⁰ Blackwoods hoped this stratagem would lead to overall completion within three or four years, to allow comparability of material. It reflected John Gordon's belief, shared with Larcom, that broadly-based statistical enquiries like the *N.S.A.* were superior to narrower sectional ones, as they allowed cross-disciplinary comparisons to be made. A shortened timescale may also have boosted Irish sales, because William Creech, Sinclair's publisher, took pains to emphasise to him how much an attenuated timescale had dampened demand for the *O.S.A.*⁵¹

The Blackwoods partners' advice that no county volume should exceed 800 octavo pages, that a single volume might cover several small counties and that the government fallback position of an abstract or digest of the material could be published for a comparatively trifling sum, were also points likely to have found favour with Peel and Young. In total, Blackwoods' suggestions reinforced the possibility of a compromise publishing scheme, fuller than the provincial one and enabling the maps and memoirs to form an interlocking 'graphical index'.⁵² However, this advice spoke to costs as much as quality. Enthusiastic individuals apart, the wholesale employment of voluntarism in Ireland to try to achieve meaningful contributions for a compendious, nationwide memoir survey would have been practically impossible, not least due to the different organisational development of the churches there and the demands which such work placed on the clergy's time.⁵³ The proposals also mistakenly assumed that most of the memoir material had already been collected and similarly, failed to suggest a realistic method to rein in Larcom, who was to be directed by a central committee, controlled either by the Board of Ordnance (Gordon) or literary figure of standing (Blackwood partners). As Larcom's employer, the Board was the likelier means of control, but it had already rejected such a suggestion in the report.⁵⁴ Similarly, although John Blackwood suggested a trial publication scheme, in which Irish subscriptions would top up the government grant if initial sales to the public were poor, his proposal foundered on the reluctance of his elder siblings to participate commercially in memoir affairs. But if the intrinsic merits of Blackwoods' scheme were weak overall, the firm's advisory role was strengthened by the lack of alternative recommendations from both protagonists. For instance, in April John Blackwood thought Adare's ideas about a county volume were 'quite vague', while similarly, Young was 'as vague as ever' about the economic section in July.⁵⁵

⁵⁰ Blackwood draft memoranda, both Apr.-May 1844 (N.L.S., MS 30073, pp 83-6; and MS 30074, ff 49-52); J. B. to R. B., 21 Apr. 1844 (N.L.S., MS 4069, ff 94-5); John Gordon to A. B., 21 May 1844 (N.L.S., MS 4070, ff 268-9).

⁵¹ Hill, 'A flawed speculation', pp 40-41.

⁵² Angélique Day, *Glimpses of Ireland's past. The Ordnance Survey memoir drawings: topography and technique* (Dublin, 2014), p. 16.

⁵³ Denominational statistics are printed in Nigel Yates, *The religious condition of Ireland, 1770-1850* (Oxford, 2006), pp 327-8.

⁵⁴ *O.M.R.*, p. xiv.

⁵⁵ J. B. to A. B., 21, 27 Apr., 13 July 1844 (N.L.S., MS 4069, ff 94-5, 100, 147-8).

The thorny matter of the economic section was itself the second aspect of the production arrangements on which the firm advised. Contemporary Irish commentators had identified a lack of knowledge about statistics and political economy in Ireland. However, Blackwoods remarked that the potential costs involved were the ones at which Peel and Young 'bogle most', with John Blackwood opining that the geological survey could provide most of the information needed instead. Young was much pleased at the firm's willingness to examine the overall scale of the section, including the feasibility of producing summary data instead, believing this would meet Peel and the government's purpose.⁵⁶ The firm then suggested James Finlay Weir Johnston, a Scottish soil scientist, who was a lecturer at Durham University, as the alternative to Larcom's suggestion of Robert Kane. Blackwoods had published Johnston's influential *Elements of agricultural chemistry and geology* in 1841 and supported him, unsuccessfully, for the vacant chair of chemistry at Edinburgh in 1844. Since William Buckland, the English geologist and confidant of Peel, had also described Kane's scheme as 'a job', Johnston seemed an ideal replacement candidate. Alexander Blackwood added that Johnston's economic survey would be produced in pricey '£10 or £20 vols'.⁵⁷ But while Young sounded out the firm in early July as potential publishers in response to Johnston's proposals, Blackwoods demurred, stating the work would need to be in a 'much more forward and settled shape', given that the book market was only just emerging from recession.⁵⁸

The third and possibly most crucial aspect of the firm's discussions was the matter of memoir subscriptions, because it offered the prospect of a middle course between full state aid and unfettered commercial sale. Who first suggested subscriptions is uncertain. Blackwoods developed this method as the most common way of publishing their works, but Samuel Lewis's *Topographical dictionary of Ireland* (1837), which achieved 10,000 prior subscriptions, was a clear indication of Peel's preferred direction of travel.⁵⁹ By May, Peel's position had hardened. His dislike of state-funded history induced him to alter the financing equation to one of matching funding of £10,000 each from the government and from the Irish aristocracy and gentry.⁶⁰ However, Peel's hopes quickly turned to ire. A large, cross-party meeting of the pro-memorialisists in London on 18 May, including, remarkably, Young and Spring Rice, fully backed the commission's proposals as a national Irish objective. However, a subsequent deputation of peers and M.P.s to the prime minister refused to subscribe this sum as the means of achieving it, politically placing the ball firmly in the government's court, with Peel threatening to do

⁵⁶ J. B. to R. B., 21 Apr. 1844 (N.L.S., MS 4069, ff 94–5); A. B. to R. B., 16 May 1844 (N.L.S., MS 4068, ff 166–8); Ciara Boylan, *The life and career of Archbishop Richard Whately: Ireland, religion and reform* (Dublin, 2018), pp 131–2, 141.

⁵⁷ A. B. to J. B., 29 June, 1 July 1844 (N.L.S., MS 4068, ff 187, 189); J. B. to A. B., 1 July 1844 (N.L.S., MS 4069, f. 142); James Johnston to R. B., [1844] (N.L.S., MS 4066, ff 156–7).

⁵⁸ J. B. to A. B., 10, 13 July 1844 (N.L.S., MS 4069, ff 147–8); Alexis Weedon, *Victorian publishing: the economics of book production for a mass market, 1836–1916* (Aldershot, 2003), p. 47.

⁵⁹ Finkelstein, *House of Blackwood*, p. 44; McWilliams, 'Ordnance Survey memoir', pp 254–5.

⁶⁰ For the development of Irish history at this period, see Clare O'Halloran, 'Historical writings, 1690–1890' in Margaret Kelleher and Philip O'Leary (eds), *The Cambridge history of Irish Literature* (2 vols, Cambridge, 2006), i, 614–25.

nothing in return.⁶¹ The provincial arrangement remained in place as the principal plank of Peel's plan, with Young telling Blackwoods on 1 July that the government would countenance nothing more. Peel then suggested, under pressure in parliament from pro-memoir M.P.s, that he might sanction memoir spending of £30,000 to £40,000 on the adjusted basis of a volume per county, but he remained adamant about the accompanying need for financial contributions from Ireland's nobility and gentry, casting doubt on whether the government in London would otherwise fund publication.⁶²

However, the viability of how a jointly-funded publication plan might operate in practice was complicated by Blackwoods' attitude to the vexed question of indemnity, a position which probably underscores the government's original authorship of the joint funding scheme.⁶³ The firm tentatively supported an emerging proposal for a subscription scheme involving 1,000 subscribers to pay ten guineas (£10 10s.) each, to help fund the work, but it was unwilling to commit to a scheme of this sort unless the government agreed to indemnify them against any eventual shortfall. The firm went further and cautioned against advertising the purchase price in advance, suggesting that subscribers commit to the unspecified cost of the whole work. Blackwoods was additionally keen for Peel to guarantee the costs of any geological work undertaken by Kane and of Ordnance personnel in Ireland if they were required to obtain more information.⁶⁴ Collectively, these proposals meant that the public purse would have had an open-ended commitment to the scheme if costs rose and subscriptions stalled and, thus, were repugnant to Peel. But from the firm's perspective, the proposal reflected the government's simplistic preoccupation with grants. John Blackwood disparagingly remarked that people not in the trade 'have always the most absurd notion' about the ease of costing a book, not least since the risk in an unregulated market predominantly fell on the publisher.⁶⁵

These discussions clearly indicate that Blackwoods had become Peel and Young's publisher of choice. In March 1844, John Blackwood was certain the firm would be chosen if the memoirs were printed in Britain. In May, Alexander Blackwood reported that Peel was 'most anxious that we undertake the thing ourselves', while at the start of July Peel was again 'very anxious' to hear from them. But whereas Alexander had thought the firm 'must apply to be publisher and encourage the thing' in July 1843, a year later he wished to have nothing more to do with the memoir scheme 'except to oblige Peel'.⁶⁶ This reaction was driven by Peel's growing inclination to dump the scheme on Blackwoods, by the lack of clear publishing proposals on either side and by the partners' pessimism that an

⁶¹ Adare to Larcom, 18 May 1844 (N.L.S., MS 7556); A. B. to R. B., 28 May 1844 (N.L.S., MS 4068, f. 175); *The Standard*, 21 May 1844; *Dublin Evening Mail*, 27 May 1844; *Cork Examiner*, 29 May 1844.

⁶² J. B. to A. B., 1 July 1844 (N.L.S., MS 4069, f. 142); *Freeman's Journal*, 25 July 1844.

⁶³ Blackwood memorandum, [May 1844] (N.L.S., MS 30074, f. 47).

⁶⁴ See Terrence McDonough, Eamonn Slater and Thomas Boylan, 'Irish political economy before and after the Famine' in Terrence McDonough (ed), *Was Ireland a colony? Economics, politics and culture in nineteenth-century Ireland* (Dublin, 2005), pp 212–15 for the Peel administration's anti-interventionist, economic stance.

⁶⁵ J.B. to R.B., 21 Apr. 1844 (N.L.S., MS 4069, ff 94–5); Weedon, *Victorian publishing*, pp 52–3, 89.

⁶⁶ A.B. to J.B., 29 July 1843 (N.L.S., MS 4063, f. 191); J.B. to R.B., 13 Mar. 1844 (N.L.S., MS 4069, ff 66–7); A.B. to R.B., 28 May 1844 (N.L.S., MS 4068, f. 175); A.B. to J.B., 1 July 1844. (N.L.S., MS 4068, f. 189); J.B. to A.B., 1 July 1844 (N.L.S., MS 4069, f. 142).

Irish statistical account would ‘have no sale at all’, especially if the work was printed in Ireland.⁶⁷

Tellingly, John Blackwood described Peel as ‘a slippery customer’ and it appears that Blackwoods’ attitude to the memoirs was primarily driven by hard-headed commercial considerations rather than party support.⁶⁸ In practice, this meant limited engagement on Blackwoods’ part. This was evident in April when the senior partners effectively refused to visit Dublin after Young and Peel had requested they supply a confidential estimate of the editorial costs of arranging the memoir material there for publication. As also noticed above, the firm demurred at taking on the economic section and this reaction may also explain why Blackwoods’ draft suggestion of a re-publication strategy for the memoirs, involving pre-paginated pages for use in both a partwork and county series, as with the *N.S.A.*, did not receive greater prominence in their May memoranda.⁶⁹

There is some evidence that Blackwoods’ reluctance to publish memoirs made the position of publisher contestable and that the memorialists sounded out alternatives. Adare tried to get John Murray as well as Blackwoods to showcase the scheme via articles in the *Quarterly Review* and *Maga*, partly under the influence of Stafford O’Brien (Augustus Stafford) M.P., a Young Englander and Irish landowner, who was stated to be ‘quite insane’ on the subject, but neither article appeared, a likely signal of both political sensitivity and commercial reticence.⁷⁰ Dr Robinson, thought by Young to be the most sensible of the memorialists, was in London in early July as part of a memorialist delegation visiting Longmans, John Murray, plus other unspecified firms, and was quizzed by Peel as to the scheme’s likely costs. However, neither set of discussions proved fruitful, as Peel refused to disclose what he might offer financially without knowing first what the memorialists thought was required. Since Lord John Russell had links with Longmans, whereas the *Quarterly* was Conservative, the memorialists’ discussions clearly transcended traditional party political lines.⁷¹ The visit to Longmans may well have resulted from the firm’s strong links with the Irish education commissioners who produced heavily-subsidised schoolbooks.⁷² Unfortunately, Longmans’ correspondence from this period does not survive, but John Murray curtly refused Adare on the basis of the ‘notorious ill-success’ of topographical works and county histories.⁷³

This was not quite the end of the publication proposals, but nothing further is known of Blackwoods’ involvement. By 1845 Hodges & Smith was being mooted as the publisher of a topographical dictionary, as first suggested by Robinson a year earlier, plus occasional memoir papers, perhaps aided by the Academy. However, a

⁶⁷ R.B. to A.B., 24 Apr. 1844 (N.L.S., MS 4070, f. 21). See also Farnar, *Irish book publishing*, pp 44–6.

⁶⁸ J.B. to R.B., 20 Dec. 1843 (N.L.S., MS 4064, f. 199).

⁶⁹ Hill, ‘A flawed speculation’, pp 35–6; Weedon, *Victorian publishing*, pp 75–6.

⁷⁰ Letters from ‘A Celt’, *The Times*, 11 Mar., 4 Apr. 1844; Adare to Larcom, 27 Apr., 9, 15 May 1844 (N.L.I., MS 7556); J. B. to A. B., 19 Mar., 15 June 1844 (N.L.S., MS 4069, ff 70–71, MS 30008, ff 126–7).

⁷¹ J. B. to A. B., 1 July 1844 (N.L.S., MS 4069, f. 142); Asa Briggs, *A history of Longmans and their books, 1724–1990: longevity in publishing* (London, 2008), pp 171–86, 188, 260–1.

⁷² John Logan, ‘The national curriculum’ in Murphy (ed.), *Oxford History of Irish Book*, iv, pp 507–10, 515; Weedon, *Victorian publishing*, p. 125.

⁷³ John Murray to Adare, 19–24 June 1844 (N.L.S., MS 41911, p. 169).

costed publication plan and commercial input, inevitably involving risk, were again deemed to be critical for receipt of any government subsidy, and this plan ultimately lapsed as well.⁷⁴ Alongside these faltering proposals, the memoir scheme's post-commission prospects were finally ended by the infighting between Colby and Larcom and 'amongst the Irish scientific gentlemen [which] is quite beyond bearing or explanation'; by the gathering storm-clouds of the Famine; and by the growth of specialised governmental and statistical enquiry.⁷⁵ The memoir scheme's window of opportunity had passed.

III

Three principal observations emerge from the foregoing discussion. Firstly, Blackwoods played a more significant part in the Irish commission than hitherto thought. If the Irish memoir scheme was concocted in Dublin, its lingering demise was due to views expressed in Edinburgh as well as in London. Blackwoods' role was not definitive, since the scheme rumbled on until 1845–6, but it was highly significant nonetheless. Effectively, the firm was Peel's star witness in a commission packed with memorialists. The commission understandably rejected Scottish voluntarism because Larcom and Colby's collecting arrangements were demonstrably superior to the *N.S.A.*'s and were backed by the authority, resources and manpower of the state. Memorialists vaunted the Survey as a progressive 'topographical and antiquarian college.'⁷⁶ But in publishing terms, Peel valued Blackwoods, because, if the *N.S.A.* seemed out-of-date, it had also been relatively comprehensive, comparatively cheap and effectively marketed by a pre-arranged compact between Scottish clerical voluntarism and a well-known and highly experienced publisher, involving a minimal amount of state aid.

Blackwoods' rejection of Larcom's 'excessive' costs, its potential participation in a compromise memoir scheme, aimed at securing funding from Irish subscribers, and its suggestion of a slimmed-down economic section, based around Johnston rather than Kane, all impressed Peel, who increasingly viewed the firm as his publisher of choice. The documentation from 1844 portrays the memoir scheme as a clash of competing practices and principles: of commercial expertise versus state funding, of costs versus quality and of utilitarianism versus antiquarianism, with Blackwoods at the publishing epicentre of the debate. The partners' initial tactics were to curry favour, as they thought securing the memoirs would be profitable, creditable and bring important contacts their way.⁷⁷ But their willingness to advise was increasingly overtaken by a reluctance to publish, based on a realisation of the scheme's financial uncertainties, constant politicking and the lack of a convincing business plan. As Peel and Young's putative publisher of choice, Blackwoods' refusal to commit to publication was a crucial tipping-point and the summer of 1844 brought the de facto demise of the topographical scheme. Irish press concern in July at Peel's reluctance in parliament to guarantee publishing the results of the

⁷⁴ Larcom to [Robinson], 26 July 1844 (N.L.I., MS 7545); letters between Larcom and Adare, 1, 5 Mar. 1845 (N.L.I., MS 7557).

⁷⁵ Young to Peel, 9 Dec. 1844 (B.L., Add. MS 40555, ff 86–9); Andrews, *Paper landscape*, pp 185–208; Ó Cadhla, *Civilizing Ireland*, p. 49.

⁷⁶ *Saunders's News-letter*, 8 Mar. 1844.

⁷⁷ J. B. to A. B., 26 July 1843 (N.L.S., MS 4064, ff 122–3).

proposed economic and geological surveys signified less the prime minister’s breach of promise and more the fading of Blackwoods’ support, with neither Hodges & Smith nor any other publisher subsequently willing to step into this breach.⁷⁸

Secondly, the Blackwood correspondence invites re-consideration of Peel’s position, including the idea of his pre-determined refusal to proceed with any memoir proposals.⁷⁹ Peel had to be pressurised into action, certainly, but the government’s provincial publishing plan, its offers of matching funding, Peel’s ire on its subsequent refusal and his attempts to secure Blackwoods as his publisher of choice — all revealed in private, not public, correspondence — tend to refute the refuser view.⁸⁰ Moreover, the demise of repeal was still pending. O’Connell remained a national celebrity despite his short-term imprisonment for sedition in June to September 1844 and he had not yet broken with Young Ireland.⁸¹ Instead, Peel’s agenda was to apply commercial expertise to the memoirs, secure financial contributions from civil society and keep his financial cards close to his chest, in order to refashion a slimmed-down, more utilitarian version of the scheme. Inevitably, ‘Sir Plausible’, as Peel was dubbed, was seen as a deceiver, determined to keep Ireland in thrall to England.⁸² But the converse is that he had been forced to intervene in a highly contentious and potentially costly Irish dispute not on his policy agenda, and one which had originated via the large degree of departmental discretion afforded to Colby and Larcom.

Peel’s cost-cutting attitude was partly pragmatic. The costs and timescale of the scheme were an estimate at best, hardly calculated to convince a master of detail like Peel of the advisability of allowing a free hand to Larcom to conduct what effectively would have been a new memoir scheme. Partly it was a matter of principle. In Peel’s view, securing matching funding was both a matter of equity and a litmus test of genuine demand for the memoirs within Ireland. In particular, he disagreed that the state should fund historical publishing, his preference for private enterprise being a commonplace attitude among his contemporaries, including Spring Rice, who had authorised *Templemore*. Partly too it was a matter of precedent because Peel was terrified of normalising ‘statistical’ expenditure that might be asked for in Scotland and England as well.⁸³ Politically, Peel balked at the twin spectres of state-dependency and open-ended financial commitments (as demonstrated once more during the Famine).⁸⁴ His overall lack of enthusiasm for a scheme which postulated a high degree of agricultural and industrial growth also manifestly instances the interpretation that his policy agenda in Ireland was primarily based on political and religious concessions rather than socio-economic reform.⁸⁵ De Grey fell into the latter camp, but while pro-memoir, even he was not convinced either

⁷⁸ *Freeman’s Journal*, 27 July 1844. See also, Ann Andrews, *Newspapers and newsmakers: the Dublin nationalist press in the mid-nineteenth century* (Liverpool, 2014), pp 18, 40, 59–68.

⁷⁹ Andrews, *Paper landscape*, pp 171–2.

⁸⁰ Adare to Larcom, 18 Mar. 1844 (N.L.I., MS 7557).

⁸¹ Geoghegan, *Liberator*, pp 183–96.

⁸² *Freeman’s Journal*, 28 May 1844.

⁸³ Larcom to Petrie, 6 June 1844 (N.L.I., MS 7567).

⁸⁴ R. A. Gaunt, *Sir Robert Peel: the life and legacy* (London, 2010), pp 37, 70; McWilliams, ‘Ordnance Survey memoir’, pp 292–8.

⁸⁵ Gaunt, ‘Sir Robert Peel’, pp 17–40.

that the Ordnance would be able to complete the memoir scheme or of its general, practical value.⁸⁶

Thirdly, the publication argument poses pertinent questions about Adare and Larcom's failure to secure a publishing agreement. As noticed, Larcom's publication plan was wafer-thin, largely topped and tailed by Adare and Young for public consumption. It had little to say about production costs, originally mooted at £400 to £500 per volume, ignored the question of commercial funding, including the vital issue of subscriptions, and was largely centred on historical and antiquarian material.⁸⁷ Larcom's remark that Peel clung to booksellers and subscriptions suggests he did not take these ideas seriously and he was still arguing in late summer that all memoir matters, including geology and economics, should be placed under him.⁸⁸ Although Colby was adamant from the start that there was to be no political interference in his work, memoir matters had boiled up considerably by 1844. The memorialists failed to recognise sufficiently that the commission was not an originating or pump-priming body but a retrospective or confirmatory one, which signalled the need to engage with the prime minister's suggestions, including commercial sale on a slimmed-down scale. However, in both practice and spirit, Larcom and Adare went their own way and paid scant regard to publication matters.

The memorialists' post-commission position is explicable in terms of the commissioners' favourable recommendations, strong backing from Irish politicians and newspapers, and an expectation that the Irish administration would support fully-funded publication, as with *Templemore*. In his vision and single-mindedness, Larcom was the Irish equivalent of Sir John Sinclair, but whereas Sinclair was a M.P. and major landowner, Larcom was a paid official whose enthusiasm could look suspiciously like a refusal to compromise and self-aggrandisement.⁸⁹ Adare, who strongly backed Larcom, lacked the political will and influence to effect a compromise settlement, while Young, if able and sympathetic, did not always know Peel's mind and was compromised as his go-between.⁹⁰ These personal and tactical weaknesses were compounded by Adare and Larcom's continuous reliance on Dublin Castle's support for publication purposes, while Mountjoy House, the Survey's Dublin headquarters, was increasingly seen as a hotbed of intrigue by opponents of the scheme.⁹¹ This strategy meant making enemies of both the Board of Ordnance's high command and the treasury. Colby was an ineffective go-between, and the master-general was latterly concerned that Larcom's activities might split the Ordnance into British and Irish branches.⁹² The memorialists' almost unwavering attachment to state funding also set the mood music for the related, crucial refusal by Ireland's political grandees to contribute to a publication programme, which was demanded by many affluent memorial supporters on patriotic grounds but from which many also potentially stood to benefit.

⁸⁶ De Grey to Peel, 3 July 1843 (B.L., Add. MS 40478, ff 101–02).

⁸⁷ Andrews, *Paper landscape*, p. 153.

⁸⁸ Larcom to [Robinson], 26 July, 13 Aug. 1844 (N.L.I., MS 7545).

⁸⁹ Patrick McWilliams, 'Larcom the cartographer: political economy in pre-Famine Ireland' in *History Ireland*, xvi, no. 2 (Mar.–Apr. 2008), pp 28–32.

⁹⁰ *Dublin Evening Packet*, 26 Mar. 1844; Andrews, *Paper landscape*, p. 162.

⁹¹ Larcom to [Henry] James, 10 Feb. 1845 (N.L.I., MS 7557).

⁹² George Murray to Peel, 19 May 1846 (B.L., Add. MS 40591, ff 283–4).

IV

This article has argued that there was a significant Scottish element to the memoir scheme, based on the commercial expertise of William Blackwood & Sons of Edinburgh, on which Peel placed great and growing emphasis. In the end, the memoir scheme's demise was essentially a failure of publication. It was not assassinated by Peel but was suffocated by a battle of competing publishing principles, values and methodology. Mid 1844 was the tipping-point, as the failure to agree terms left the memoirs without effective funding, a coherent publishing plan or a willing publisher in a venture in which publication was key to the scheme's civic dissemination and success. Blackwoods was the glue which might have stuck Peel and the memorialists together, but these principals were never in full synchronicity. Peel had ultimate authority over the budget, but his emphasis on private publishing and dislike of state-funded history were genuine concerns rather than an insidious stratagem of political legerdemain. The memorialists' cause was compromised by their reluctance to submit to a scaled-down, utilitarian scheme and their critical refusal to agree to matching funding. More broadly, if the Scottish accounts show the limitations of civil society as a collecting agency, then the memoir scheme reveals the limitations in Ireland of publication by departmental discretion. Comparatively, these differing approaches to statistical endeavour in Scotland (voluntaryism) and Ireland (state funding) represent another note of 'dissonance' or dissimilarity between the civil organisation of the two countries during the nineteenth century.⁹³

Two caveats are worth adding, partly based on Scotland's experience with its statistical accounts, to help contextualise the demise of the memoir scheme, with the essential qualifier that ultimately it never came to print. The first concerns the limitations of contemporary statistics. Peel's failure to fund the memoir can still seem churlish, given the growth in cheap parliamentary papers at that period and the common, associated foible of over-printing.⁹⁴ But the nineteenth-century saleability, usability and acceptability of contemporary statistics all militate against easy acceptance of the premise of the memoir scheme as a major panacea to Ireland's perceived ills. Although defenders of *Templemore* could point to the ready sale of most of its 1,500 print run, Sinclair's *O.S.A.* initially sold well too, but interest gradually fizzled out due to its ten-year publishing timescale.⁹⁵ The *N.S.A.* also fared poorly, despite two-thirds of its volumes costing twelve shillings or less, and despite the deliberate inclusion of history and antiquities, as with the memoir scheme, to bolster sales.⁹⁶

Furthermore, as noticed above, it was a weak inductive argument for Larcom and others to assert that if the Survey maps were cartographically excellent, the memoirs would be topographically first-rate too. The synthetic or broad brush approach of the memoir questionnaire was becoming old-fashioned and was increasingly being replaced by specialisation of labour and dedicated government enquiries as

⁹³ Frank Ferguson and James McConnel, 'Introduction' in eidem (eds), *Ireland and Scotland in the nineteenth century* (Dublin, 2009), p. 7.

⁹⁴ David McKitterick, 'Organising knowledge in print' in idem (ed.), *Cambridge history of the book in Britain*, vi: 1830–1914 (Cambridge, 2009), pp 535–7.

⁹⁵ *O.M.R.*, pp 36, 40; copy letter, William Creech to Sir John Sinclair, 27 Oct. 1809, in Withrington and Grant, *O.S.A.*, i, pp lxiv–lxvi.

⁹⁶ Gibson, 'N.S.A. publication dates', p. 51.

the norms of society.⁹⁷ Larcom effectively implied as much by proposing a hybrid scheme, employing Kane and Petrie's specialised knowledge, but with geology, natural history and statistics prospectively hived off. Revealingly, when George Grierson, the Queen's Printer in Ireland, suggested another attempt at an Irish statistical account in 1858, inspired by a visit to Scotland and George Chalmers's *Caledonia* (3 volumes, 1807–24), it was Larcom who replied that the memoir subjects were now being carried out by specialised means instead.⁹⁸ During this period, 'statistics' also lacked sophisticated methodological tools and techniques, and frequently consisted of general text rather than numbers, meaning that contributions to the *N.S.A.* sometimes resulted in bias, omission, repetition of detail and general unevenness of returns. The Manchester Statistical Society complained the *N.S.A.*'s figures were unusable for this last reason.⁹⁹ It must be questioned to what extent agricultural and industrial progress would have been accelerated in Ireland by memoir-writing: the evidence in Scotland is negligible.¹⁰⁰ Moreover, proponents argued that memoir 'statistics' would be a technical, objective guide to informed policy making in Ireland. But statistics was generally regarded then as a subset of political economy and major doubts over its validity as a science remained even after the foundation of a chair of political economy at Trinity College in 1833.¹⁰¹ In practice, not only did memoir writers display bias, usually ascendancy bias in their descriptions, but the memoirs also reflected their supporters' own agendas. For example, Larcom and Colby's aimed to prove that Ireland's economic ills were not self-inflicted. Similarly, both Larcom and Petrie hoped to create a revamped civil society in which continuing loyalty to Britain was fused with an appreciation of traditional Irish culture.¹⁰² As a contrasting measure of how convoluted the memoir scheme could become, one nationalist outlet claimed if the Survey's mapping was colonial, the memoir would be 'Irish all out.'¹⁰³

The second major caveat is that the memoir episode has become chiefly notable in contemporary Irish studies for its enduring cultural legacy, overshadowing the original objectives of social and economic improvement.¹⁰⁴ This point is underscored by the comparative lack of regret by Irish historians for the scheme's economic section, which is ironic, given that utilitarian improvement was the scheme's original driver, with Larcom hoping that rural progress in particular could forestall mass migration.¹⁰⁵ Economic improvement in Ireland has been characterised by many critics as an integral part of the ascendancy *rentier* system and the associated trends of anglicization, colonial rule and ever-closer union with

⁹⁷ Andrews, *Paper landscape*, p. 172.

⁹⁸ Letters between George A. Grierson and Larcom, 13, 18 Dec. 1858 (N.L.I., MS 7551).

⁹⁹ Hill, 'A flawed speculation', pp 41, 43.

¹⁰⁰ C. J. Berry, *The idea of commercial society in the Scottish Enlightenment* (Edinburgh, 2013), p. 23; M. E. Daly, *The spirit of earnest enquiry: the Statistical and Social Enquiry Society of Ireland, 1847–1997* (Dublin, 1997), pp 1–2, 9, 11, 13–15.

¹⁰¹ I. D. Hill, 'Statistical Society of London – Royal Statistical Society: the first 100 years, 1834–1934' in *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, series A, cxlvii (1984), pp 130–34; K. J. Rankin, 'The *Journal of the Statistical and Social Enquiry Society of Ireland*' in Murphy (ed.), *Oxford history of Irish book*, iv, 564–6.

¹⁰² Doherty, *Irish Ordnance Survey*, pp 42–4, 54, 125–36, 139–52.

¹⁰³ *The Nation*, 6 Apr. 1844.

¹⁰⁴ Doherty, *Irish Ordnance Survey*, pp 199–210; Ó Cadhla, *Civilizing Ireland*, pp 21–2, 25–6.

¹⁰⁵ McWilliams, 'Ordnance Survey memoir', pp 134–5.

Britain.¹⁰⁶ It is hardly surprising, therefore, given all of the failings of the system during the Famine years, that the putative benefits of improvement have received short shrift in so many Irish textbooks.¹⁰⁷ In the memoirs' case, this lack of regret stemmed in part from non-implementation but also from the weaknesses of the scheme itself. Kane's proposed economic section as part of the revamped memoir scheme placed great emphasis on the potential benefits to the Irish economy of agricultural chemistry, but his later soil laboratory in the Museum of Irish Industry was abandoned in 1852 and agricultural chemistry generally played little part in enhancing Ireland's agricultural fortunes at that period.¹⁰⁸ Similarly, the natural history respondents to the memoir commission generally saw no special advantages to the scheme and as in Scotland, it was always easier to assert the economic value of a mass-gathering information scheme than qualitatively to demonstrate its efficacy.¹⁰⁹

The prevailing cultural legacy of the memoirs in Ireland is a legitimate one, given the ground-breaking importance of Petrie, O'Donovan and O'Keefe's scholarly work for Irish studies. O'Donovan believed the Irish language and parts of the country's culture were then in terminal decline.¹¹⁰ Both the Irish memoirs and the Scottish statistical accounts were rightfully taken up by later generations of scholars as a rich, enduring and multi-faceted portrait of their countries. But unlike Ireland, the Scottish accounts were free from political ramifications. Their voluntary production by the ministers of the kirk rather than a workforce funded by the government in London avoided the controversies which surrounded Young's ill-fated commission, and the subsequent accusations in Irish society and its increasingly independent press that Peel had never been open to letting the memoir project proceed.¹¹¹ In addition, the historical material in the Scottish accounts was primarily produced for drawing-room interest, whereas the memoirs writers had a far more weighty ambition of producing a serious Irish history, free of English bias. Although historical memoir activity eventually ground to a halt, the work of the Ordnance in this area had an unintended legacy effect by helping to inspire the contemporaneous emergence of the influential Young Ireland grouping, a grouping whose open emphasis in this case was on Ireland's history as stirring polemic rather than objective truth.¹¹²

Despite these caveats, Peel's prime objection in publication terms was financial, not political or cultural. Indeed, claims of simple anti-Irishness on Peel's part are

¹⁰⁶ Ó Cadhla, *Civilizing Ireland*, pp 28–31; Helen O'Connell, 'The nature of improvement in Ireland' in Matthew Kelly (ed.), *Nature and the environment in nineteenth-century Ireland* (Liverpool, 2019), pp 16–21, 26.

¹⁰⁷ Tadhg Foley, *Death by discourse? Political economy and the great Irish famine* (Hamden, CT, 2016); Cormac Ó Gráda, *Ireland before and after the Famine: explorations in economic history, 1800–1925* (2nd ed., Manchester, 1993), pp 125–33.

¹⁰⁸ *O.M.R.*, p. xiv; Juliana Adelman, 'The agriculture diploma in Queen's College, Belfast, 1845–63, and science education in nineteenth-century Ireland' in *Irish Economic and Social History*, xxxv (2008), pp 57–61; Andrews, *Paper landscape*, p. 177.

¹⁰⁹ *O.M.R.*, pp 55, 76–7; *Saunders's News-letter*, 8 Mar. 1844; *Cork Advertiser*, 11 Apr. 1844; *Dublin Review*, June 1844.

¹¹⁰ Gearóid Denvir, 'Literature in Irish, 1800–1890: from the Act of Union to the Gaelic League' in Kelleher and O'Leary (eds), *Cambridge history of Irish literature*, i, 559.

¹¹¹ Murphy, *Ireland, 1791–1891*, p. 79.

¹¹² James Quinn, *Young Ireland and the writing of Irish history* (Dublin, 2015), pp 2, 31, 60–61.

surely misplaced. The Scottish accounts received no direct state funding, and the noted Scottish antiquarian, Cosmo Innes, got short shrift from the master-general in 1845 when attempting to secure the Ordnance's assistance for his celebrated historical series, *Origines parochiales Scotiae*.¹¹³ Government funding for archaeological and historical bodies in both Scotland and England was still a generation or more away, with Irish historical and antiquarian memoir activity blurring the lines between the commercial writing and the publicly-funded collecting of such material. Peel is not in this view the simple villain of the piece. Instead, Larcom and Blackwoods should both be added to the list of principals alongside the memoirs' influential political backers, whose failure to agree to Peel's qualified publishing proposals meant that the scheme slowly withered away.

¹¹³ Murray to Colby, 25 June 1845 (T.N.A., Ordnance Office papers, WO46/75, pp 304–07); Cosmo Innes (ed.), *Origines parochiales Scotiae: the antiquities ecclesiastical and territorial of the parishes of Scotland* (3 vols, Bannatyne Club, Edinburgh, 1851–5).