"Philanthropic Experiences: Reconstructing Irish Famine Relief Projects." American Conference for Irish Studies, Madison, WI. April, 2011

Between 1845 and 1852 people around the world donated over one million British pounds to the cause of Irish famine relief. Both religious and lay philanthropic groups solicited and collected money from places as close to the crisis as rural Ireland as far as the Cherokee and Choctaw nations in Arkansas. Today, I am going to talk about the ways in which historians might begin to recover the experiences of participants in Irish famine relief, and in particular, how the voices of non-elite donors might be incorporated into histories of philanthropy and the famine. What I am proposing today is an intersection of quantitative and discursive histories of humanitarianism and philanthropy, as well as more than a few interpretative, or even imaginative leaps. So, a caveat: Although the tentative language in this paper is intentional, this paper is very much a musing on possible methods going forward, and I look forward to any comments or suggestions that the audience might have. I should also say that although news of the famine spread to, and donations came from "the East," in this paper I am going to focus on North Atlantic news and philanthropic networks.

Much fruitful work has been done on the ways in which philanthropic groups organized and administered Irish famine relief. Similarly, much worthy attention has been paid to donations or philanthropic actions of elites like Queen Victoria, members of the royal family or (one of my favorites) the "emperor of Turkey Sultan Abdul Medjid Kahn." This focus on "famous" donations is understandable enough. Elite donors were highly visible in the nineteenth century, and remain highly visible today. Records of these donations and correspondence

concerning them were widely discussed in the contemporary press. Newspapers lauded Queen Victoria's appeal for a day of prayer for Ireland and her personal donation as "royal benevolence," and similarly celebrated contributions made by other members of the royal family. Evidence of these donations is preserved in the National Archives of the U.K. at Kew and in the Irish National Archives in Dublin, in documents created specifically to "testify" and record for posterity "our [that is to say, relief organizations'] deepfelt thanks and gratitude."[1] While it is impossible to access the interior lives of these highly-visible donors, their humanitarian engagement with Ireland did leave a prominent mark on the historical record.

In contrast, non-elites' responses to the famine, and the generous impulses governing those who provided the majority of donated funds, have been largely silent – in large part because their experiences are so difficult to access. While relief groups kept donor lists, and printed those lists in Irish, British and American papers, for many donors all we can know is their name and how much they donated. Some donors included information that allows us to know or guess their profession, and still others included addresses, but for the vast majority of famine relief donors, very little can be known. As a consequence, the experiences of individual donors with regards to the famine are nearly impossible to locate, and their imprint on the archive is faint – if present at all.

I think, however, that resurrecting these voices and experiences will help to enrich the field of famine studies by pointing to the wide range of people who were drawn into famine relief. If we are able to reconstruct the motivations of famine donors, it might be possible to

[11] *Report of the British Association for the relief of the extreme distress in Ireland and Scotland; with correspondence of the agents, tables &c. and a list of subscribers* (London: Richard Clay, Bread Street Hill, 1849), 181.

better understand how these people came to engage in philanthropy at all, and how they came to focus on Ireland in particular. It is not enough to assume that these thousands of men and women were simply acting out of a vague sense of humanitarianism or Christian charity, although Christianity and humanism certainly played a role in decisions to donate. Rather, I contend that a constellation of influences, including the ways in which the famine was framed in the popular press, the language of appeals, and the demography of donors significantly shaped responses to the famine. In consequence, in order to understand why people gave, it is necessary to explicate the myriad influences at work upon potential donors, and to parse how those influences might have been interpreted by people from a range of social and economic spheres.

I am going to begin by describing how people outside of Ireland, or even at some distance from the most affected areas came to learn of the famine. I will then briefly outline the arc of famine reporting in papers from Ireland, Britain and America. Next, I will discuss the content of appeals for relief, before turning to an analysis of the donor population. I will conclude with a discussion of how these various parts – textual analyses from the press and quantitative analyses of donors and donations – might work together to allow us to imagine the ways in which donors to famine relief understood the crisis in Ireland.

In the mid-nineteenth century, news, carried by horse, mail coach or rail, could travel from Cork to Dublin in four days. From Dublin, the London and British provincial papers might receive copies of Irish newspapers and print news from Ireland as little as two days later, while steamships might take up to two weeks to deliver news from Europe to American port cities. Newspapers outside of Ireland were deeply interested in Irish news in the 1840s, but if they

didn't have foreign correspondents of their own, often had to rely on rural Irish papers to furnish updates on the states of the country. This practice of borrowing and re-printing news was so common that in November of 1846 the *Cork Constitution* complained "some of our Dublin Contemporaries frequently quote from other Papers articles of news which have been pilfered from the *Constitution*. May we request their attention to this? The pilfering process is continued from month to month, an acknowledgement being sometimes conceded to perhaps one paragraph to cover the dishonesty practiced on the others."[2] This borrowing – or pilfering – of news meant that newspapers in Arkansas, for example, might print articles that had been gleaned from reports published in the New York papers, which relied on articles originally published in newspapers in Cork, which in turn drew on the reports of people who were actually experiencing the potato failure and the effects of famine. Although these articles might have been printed for the first time up to three weeks before they were read by Americans, they often conveyed an immediate need for action. It was conceivable to readers that, even if the precise events reported in the article they were currently reading were weeks past, similar events – and for the purposes of appeals similar destitution – were taking place at that very moment. An example of this immediacy and re-printing is notable in the *Cherokee Advocate* of May of 1847, in an account of "the condition of Ireland" that drew on the *Cork Examiner*, the *Cork Reporter* and the *Christian Observer* in which was reported that "All accounts agree that the distress in Ireland, and the sufferings of the population are unmitigated, and surpass all that imagination can picture" and that "In the midst of appalling scenes of destitution and death, food is pouring into the country from all parts of the world, yet without seeming to arrest the famine."[3] This article represented that destitution and starvation were happening "now" and that despite wide-spread relief efforts,

[2] *CC*. November 1st, 1846
[3] *CA*. May 20th, 1847

the effects of famine were unmitigated.

So, in the mid-nineteenth century, across the world people were reading – or being read to – about the famine. If it was not a daily concern by 1846 the fact of a crisis in Ireland was at least common knowledge. The chronology of famine reporting initially followed a similar arc in newspapers from Ireland, Britain and America. However, once these papers started to parse the causes, consequences and blame for the crisis, arguments about Ireland began to differ from place to place. Due to time constraints, I am going to talk generally about these differences in this paper, but I would be happy to answer any specific questions about regional variance afterwards.

The potato failure was first reported in rural Ireland in the late summer of 1845, and descriptions of the failed crops began to pour into Irish papers. Shortly after the first reports of the crop failure, some nationalist commentators began to describe the crisis more generally as a famine, caused by "English legislation," "English tyranny" and "absenteeism."[4] These initial reports were almost immediately followed by debates about how real the crisis was. The *Dublin Evening Mail* asserted, "the 'Famine' panic sought to be created by a certain party in Ireland is a cry of faction, and not a cry for food," and asserted that rumors of famine would raise the price of food, and require needless and expensive government involvement in Ireland.[5] The *Freeman's Journal* countered this claim stating "we perceive with regret that endeavors are now used to persuade the government that there is no dearth to attend to - no scarcity apprehended. This is the object of the Mail of last night in an article prompted by the worst and most

[4] *CE*. September 8th, 1845
[5] *DEM*. November 17th, 1845

dangerous spirit."[6] Although debates over the veracity of claims of scarcity continued in the Dublin press through 1847, in other places by the end of 1845 the consequences of a potato failure began to be taken seriously, and debates shifted from whether there was a crisis at all to who was to blame for the crisis that existed. Once discussion turned to the culpability for and consequences of the famine, interpretations began to diverge, laying blame alternately at the feet of the imperial parliament, the corn laws, metropolitan interests or imperial hubris, and looking, again alternately, to an Irish parliament, free trade, the inherent American character or local elites for solutions to the crisis.

For example, some members of the London press would have encouraged their subscribers to analyze the scope of their imperial obligations to a lesser, but nevertheless vital limb of the British empire. One paper noted that, if asked for relief "the Saxons, who have often come to thy rescue, will esteem thee. Irishmen all! Be up and Sing … The empire, by unity and reasonable argument will succeed."[7] In another case, the *Times* argued that if Britons were to work to "cultivate the land which we possess [in Ireland], and in the doing of that, to employ the people, to benefit the proprietors to enrich the country and to increase the power and the resources of the empire."[8] In newspapers around the Atlantic, it was accepted that something must be done for Ireland.

I am now going to turn to specific appeals, and the rhetorical mechanisms that were employed in service of eliciting sympathy for Ireland. Many appeals were couched in a language that suggested a wide community of the obligated and the interested. These were addressed to

---

[6] *FJ.* November 14th 1845
[7] *LWN.* 18th January, 1846
[8] *LT, 17th October, 1847*

"all who can contribute, and who can feel for the sufferings of their famishing fellow creatures" – a phrase which relied on the idea that anyone reading about Ireland would be sure to remotely "feel" Irish suffering. These relied on a general knowledge of Ireland, and on an awareness of Irish destitution, which was supplied by the contemporary press. *The Nation* described a part of Cork in which could be found "men arraigned for stealing horses that they might feed on them - Christian mothers in the frenzy of want, committing cannibalism - the Christian dead eaten by dogs, within the shadow of the spire whose pastor, too, lies a stark corpse."[9] More evocative still was an account written by a visitor to Skibbereen, which described, in a house afflicted by famine: "sitting by a few sods of turf in the corner, was a miserable looking girl, who had only that day risen from off her fever bed and crying madly and frantically, was the remaining daughter, who had three times relapsed into fever. With an expression of grief and frenzy, she rushed out of the cabin, tearing her hair, screaming wildly 'my father and my mother are dead - and I am left alone!' Such a scene of misery and distress I believe was never before exhibited, it was indeed, too much for my stoicism, for I confess I was affected to tears. To witness the husband a perfect skeleton, still warm, to see his wretched wife extended by his side, ignorant of his fate and indifferent to her own, and to hear the feeble cries of their expiring offspring asking for a morsel of food - was altogether a scene as indescribable as it was deplorable."[10]

When the appeals circulated by relief associations stated "under he pressure of calamity … we feel with many of our countrymen that an appeal to your characteristic benevolence would neither be lessening nor injurious to the spirit of independence which becomes us as an integral part of this great nation" or when an announcement proclaimed "A bazaar will be held in Belfast on Tuesday next for the relief of the Connaught poor … At the other extremity of the island,

[9] *TN*. April 8th, 1848
[10] *MC*. January 9th, 1848

private charity is exerting itself in behalf of distress" and when these appeals were followed by accounts of the distress in Skibbereeen or other places, readers were made acutely aware of the exact nature of the suffering their donations would mitigate. We might imagine how readers would have responded to these evocative descriptions and accompanying appeals. Even today, in a well lit room and in the safety of the twenty-first century, descriptions of the "feeble cries" of a woman's "expiring offspring" or the "warm skeleton" of her husband are chilling. I think we must consider what these articles would have meant for people who could be reasonably sure, while reading, that if the particular people described were no longer suffering – people similar to them were.

However, appeals did not rely on sympathy alone to elicit action. In many newspapers, particular local concerns were mobilized in concert with general appeals to "all friends of humanity." Encouragements to readers to interpret the famine in a particular way were occasionally quite overt, as in an article in *The Nation*, a paper which framed the famine as a clarion-cry for an Irish parliament: "the union was the assumption to legislate for us by a country which filled our soil with martyrs, and our statute-books with penal laws - which, finding the persecution of the sword insufficient, created famine by an elaborate process of desolation for the avowed purpose of exterminating us."[11] In this case, appeals were solicited both to fund relief efforts in rural Ireland, and to contribute to political funds or "repeal rent." However, in many other cases, editors did not explicitly instruct readers to understand the famine in certain terms, but instead let the content of the paper itself shape the way in which readers interpreted the famine. This "framing"– the ways in which editors and writers implicitly influenced readers' interpretations – played an important role in famine relief projects. In Manchester, for example,

[11] *TN*. June 7th, 1845

the famine was framed as both a failure of policy in the form of the Cork Laws, and as part of a larger failure of metropolitan interests to care for those at the periphery of Britain, leaving those peripheral Britons to look after each other. Donors were encouraged to give – in this case to the relief of Irish immigrants in Britain – because the metropolitan government, with characteristic "heartless cruelty" had left the relief of the Irish to "overseers of Liverpool" who could not "send the poor creatures back without exposing them to imminent risk of starvation."[12] Given these framings, it is possible to speculatively re-create the "information environment" in which readers might have experienced the famine. For them, the famine would have existed at the center of a constellation of ideas – including almost unbelievable suffering, political arguments about Ireland's future, and assumptions about the intersection of sympathy and active charity.

Now – on to the quantitative. Although little can be known about most of the donors to famine relief, it is possible to infer some aspects of their character as a group from the information contained in published donor lists. Relief organizations printed lists of donors in the popular newspapers of the cities in which they solicited, and some groups also published annual reports detailing both the contributions made to the organization and how those contributions were spent. While these lists were meant to keep relief organizations honest by lying bare their income and expenditure, they might also have served to encourage those who had not already donated to do so. We might imagine that a member of a London club, reading news in which the famine was framed as a crisis of empire, and considering his own obligations to the Irish, might have been encouraged, or even shamed to donate by seeing his fellows' names listed as donors in print.

[12] *MG*. December 12th, 1846

While substantial sums of money came from elites like Queen Victoria, thousands of donations were made by the "middling" or even lower sort. In a sample of nearly four thousand donations, collected from notices printed in major American, Irish and British newspapers, over 28% of donations came from people with some social standing – that is to say, from men who identified as esquires, doctors, politicians, or women of some rank. Although some donors might have chosen to remain anonymous, the fact that many men – and this group is comprised almost entirely of men – did affix honorifics or professions to their name suggests that doing so was the norm. These donations ranged from as little as two shillings by William Chester esq, to as much as three hundred pounds by M.P. W. Boulton. In my sample, this group contributed over £25,000, and their average donation was almost three times that of people of no specified rank. Because members of this group were likely to be of moderate to well-off means, we might assume that generally, relatively low donations indicate a relatively low level of interest, and that high donations a significant level of interest – either in Ireland, in philanthropy, or in being perceived as philanthropic.

In contrast, among men and women whose entries in donor lists indicated no rank or profession, low donations might just have easily indicated limited income. In my sample of 3,913 donations, over half – 56 percent – came from men or women with no identifying information as to rank or profession (the remaining 15 percent were donations from towns, congregations, companies or other groups of people.) Of these donations, the lowest was 1penny by a Miss Carleton – the lowest possible donations, and the highest was £200 from "W," an anonymous contributor from Philadelphia, who we might assume, but cannot know, actually belonged with the titled or professioned. His donations is an example of how little we can know about individuals, but how as part of an aggregate patterns in donations begin to be apparent.

The average donation from this group was a little over £9. In the mid-nineteenth centurie, common labourers in Britain could make between 9s and 12s each week, and in Cork, labouring on the public works projects earned the worker 1s per day. Middle-class clerks might have made £150 a year – which works out to just under £3 a week. Given these incomes, a donation as small as one penny might have been a considerable sum if Miss Carleton was a member of a labourer's family, but would have been rather paltry if she had been well off, and even donations that seem small – the average £9 in comparison with "W"'s generous £200 – were likely to be a substantive part of an average household's income.[13]

So, to conclude – what, if anything can this sketch of a donor population tell us about individual donations, and how can a quantitative analysis of donations work with investigations of rhetoric around famine appeals to give us a richer picture of famine relief? The experiences and motivations of individual donors, unless they left some mark on the record outside of their participation in relief – and had relatively uncommon names – will still be nearly impossible to trace. However, we can infer from the range of donation amounts and the range of professions listed (or not) that people from a variety of class backgrounds contributed to famine relief. While I presented these donations today as part of one large set, they draw on data collected from New York, Dublin, Cork, Manchester and London, and in each place donors came from a similar range of professions, and similar amounts were given.

In terms of determining whether donors were affected by reports in the press, conclusions must be tentative. The papers from which I drew language of appeals and reporting were circulated fairly widely, and it is likely that newspapers were shared, rented out or read aloud to

[13] E. H. Hunt, "Industrialization and Regional Inequality: Wages in Britain, 1760-1914," *The Journal of Economic History* 46, no. 4 (December 1986): 935-966.

expand the population of those exposed to the news. In consequence, it is also likely that a wide range of people were exposed to both reports on the condition of Ireland and appeals for donations. While we can never be sure how congruent these two groups were – the donors and the readers – we can say that newspapers targeted, and donations came from populations that looked similar.

This evidence is far from conclusive, and at most we can say that there was some correlation between the population of donors and of those who had access to the news, and that people from a range of social backgrounds did contribute – often substantial sums in light of average incomes – to famine relief. What remains to be done is to attempt to tie incidences of donations with particular appeal campaigns, and to investigate how the framing of the famine in particular places might have affected different socio-economic groups of people. I think that imagination is imperative, and that, though tentative, through both an analysis of donor groups and through a close reading of what they were reading, we might be able to begin to put ourselves in the shoes of donors, and to imagine the circumstances which compelled so many people around the world to participate in famine relief.