

**Sélection de sujets proposés lors des épreuves orales de l'agrégation externe d'anglais,
option B, session 2015 :**

« La Grande Famine en Irlande, 1845-1851 »

5 textes et 10 leçons

1. "To 'Hell or Connaught' – to Canada or the Grave", *The Nation*, 3 April 1847
2. "Termination of the Relief System", *The Freeman's Journal*, Thursday, August 12, 1847
3. *The Spectator*, 12 August 1848, p. 2
4. Nassau William SENIOR, "Relief of Irish Distress in 1847 and 1848", *Edinburgh Review* (October 1849), in *Journals, Conversations and Essays Relating to Ireland*, vol. 1, London: Longmans, Green, and C°, 1868, pp. 233-236
5. Rev. Sidney Godolphin OSBORNE, *Gleanings in the West of Ireland*, London: T. & W. Boone, 1850, pp. 254-256

1. "Providence"
2. "Reform and revolution"
3. "Poverty and morality"
4. Sir George Nicholls (1853)
5. Isaac Butt (1866)
6. Alexander Martin Sullivan (1877)
7. Peter Gray (1995)
8. Mary Daly (1996)
9. D. George Boyce (2005)
10. Patrick Maume (2009)

Comment on the following document:

To “Hell or Connaught” – to Canada or the Grave

Six Irish Peers and twelve Irish Commoners have laid a scheme before Lord John Russell for the transportation of 1,500,000 Irishmen to Canada, at a cost of 9,000,000*l.* sterling to be paid by an income tax “on Irish property,” at 1*l.* per cent. for the first year, 2*l.* for the second, and 3*l.* for the third – that is, paying in proportion more money to England as they banish more men to Canada. This scheme is propounded in a pamphlet of 51 closely printed pages, and introduced by a letter which states that they, the projectors, “hope to procure numerous adhesions to the principle of the memorial,” which they are to present to his Lordship “after Easter;” but that they thought it more respectful to his Lordship to send it to him “at once, without waiting for its circulation in Ireland” – the concurrence of Ireland being a minor matter, if his Lordship favored the job.

Numerous adhesions to the principle in Ireland! To the principle of wholesale depopulation, for the benefit of Canada! We should like to see the man who would dare in a public assembly of Irishmen to advocate this measure. Where is the necessity for accepting the Whig issue – *emigrate or die*? Do the Irish aristocracy thus, in due form, over their several autographs and seals, solemnly abandon the Irish peasantry to sweeping expatriation? Let us have an answer, and that quickly.

We admit, the scheme is liberal in all provisions – the landlords offer to be taxed to get rid of the human incumbrances on their estates, and they even propose to pack off their Church with them, “as the only existing institution really formed, respected, and loved by the people.” Ah! gentlemen, the Irish aristocracy, if it had only deserved it, might also have been “really respected and loved by the people.” But you have discovered that it is not; and so you would confederate with England to transport these injured millions to some untrodden region far west of the horizon of civilization.

But we tell Mr W. H. Gregory, Mr M. J. O’Connell, and Mr J. R. Godley – we tell Dr Whately, and the other signers of this nefarious document, that they shall not succeed. We warn Lord John Russell not to tamper with Ireland just now any further; and we advise the people, with all the energy of sincerity, to sow every grain of seed that they can lay hold of, and we will see whether they or strangers are to eat our next harvest.

But, perhaps, we are mistaken. Perhaps the Irish people will give up the island without a struggle. Perhaps they wish for nothing better than to escape from the ravages of the landlord and the agent, into the country of ague*-breeding fens, and the woods of the cat-a-mountain**, where, allied to the friendly descendants of the French Canadians, they may achieve Independence, and laugh England to scorn. Or – conjecture most likely of all – perhaps they do *not* intend to be driven from the Irish soil by an allied gang of coward landlords and knavish Whigs.

The Nation, 3 April, 1847.

* *ague*: a fever (such as from malaria) that is marked by paroxysms of chills, fever, and sweating recurring at regular intervals.

** *cat-a-mountain*: any of various wild cats.

Comment on the following document:

[...] On Sunday next the general suspension of the relief system takes place throughout Ireland. Such was the rescript* of the commissioners – and orders have been given to make up accounts, and reduce everything to the best possible condition for an easy settlement with the least possible delay. The inspectors have commenced the work with varying emotions – some with a light, far more with an heavy heart. The Committees of Finance have run up their columns of figures, and left nothing to be desired in the way of regularity and promptitude. All went on quite to the satisfaction of the Chief Commissioners. The Chancellor of the Exchequer, too, boasted of the nicety of his calculating powers in squaring the income to the expenditure, but when pressed by some of the small, surly economists in the House of Commons, he took credit for a saving to the Treasury of some 600,000*l.* out of the original five millions. Well, what has taken place since the first closing order had issued, and Sir C. Wood rejoiced in preserving for panic-seized England the bountiful sum of half a million – *pro tanto*, curtailing the wretched poor of Ireland of a few additional weeks' subsistence? Is the country quite prepared to shut up the soup shops, painful and humiliating as they are to a generous and sensitive people? Would it be consistent with the claims of justice and humanity – with the duties of government – with the preservation of human life, and the maintenance of public order? We think the answer in all must be in the negative.

Property will be severely pressed by the instalments under the temporary relief act. Already a rate of 8s. in the pound has been directed by the government, and an appeal to the courts of law is threatened in the event of a refusal to impose the rate. There should, then, one would suppose, be an universal anxiety on the part of the owners of property to bring the system, which involves such trouble, responsibility, and future obligations, to a rapid close. They very reverse of this feeling pervades the classes who administered the system, and are liable for its burthens. What does this fact establish? Does it not clearly prove that the people are not prepared to be forced so soon on their own resources, and that the resolve of the commissioners is at least premature. We see no substantial reason whatever why the 15th of August should be selected as the day of expulsion. That date was fixed several months ago, just as if the commissioners had been favoured with a foreknowledge of the intentions of Providence, and beheld the future goodness of God in the season with which he blessed the land. The day was chosen at random – arbitrarily and empirically – and, like all such fortuitous fixtures should yield to argument and circumstances.

The circular in our paper of yesterday states the objections, rational and well-founded – made by numerous local committees to the termination of relief on Sunday next. 1st – The immature state of the harvest. 2nd – The general want of means among the poor to support themselves. 3d – No funds with the Board of Guardians. Every person acquainted with the state of the country – who knows anything of its seed time, and the slow ripening of its crops – must be aware that the first objection admits of no sufficient answer. [...]

“Termination of the Relief System”, *The Freeman's Journal*, Thursday, August 12, 1847

* *rescript*: an official or authoritative order, decree, edict, or announcement

Comment on the following document:

Mr. Smith O'Brien was taken at the close of last week, under characteristic circumstances. The fugitive from justice committed such a practical bull¹ as to venture to a railway station. He who was but yesterday extravagantly elated, was now depressed most woefully [sic],² most unaccountably. He was recognized by many, by so many, that the people of the country must have exercised a self-denial in not earning the reward offered for his apprehension, which at once excites pity and respect; respect for their fidelity, pity for their devotion to every cause and any leader but such as would promote their own well-being. The country, however, remains quiet, excepting some mail-robberies and other minor cases of brigandage. Thus, the firmness and energy of the Government have produced ample fruits; and the progress of affairs towards a better state is quite as favourable as ought to be expected. What is the dismay, then, occasioned by reports which wear some aspect of authenticity, that the Whig Ministers are taking steps towards a revival of the old alliance with the Repealers. We incline to discredit the reports, in spite of appearances; the policy would be so monstrous — too bad even for the official allies of O'Connell. It would imply a sinking even from the Whig standard: it would indicate that the Whig Government of 1848 is to the Whig Government of 1835 what John O'Connell is to Daniel. If we were to suppose for a moment that the reports were true, we could anticipate none but the most deplorable consequences. The reign of feebleness would be restored — the rule of pretences instead of realities; that régime under which the O'Connell party would help, in disguise, to keep the Whigs in office, and would be repaid by crumbs of Whig patronage. It is true that Lord John Russell's surprisingly inopportune declaration on Wednesday, that "associations to petition for repeal of the Union" would not be illegal, gives colour to the worst of these rumours. Ireland is recovering from rebellion, and is still under a quasi-dictatorship; it is notorious that the O'Connell party can and still do play fast and loose with the "lawful agitation" for Repeal, so as to take in and confound all "moral force" and "physical force" that will consent to mince their words and equivocate; and it is at such a time that the first Minister of the Crown plays with "constitutional" dogmas and lends high official sanction to equivocation and the blarney of sedition! But still, we say, the rumours cannot be true: Lord John Russell must see the difference between a John O'Connell and a Daniel, and cannot expect the slightest advantage from any new alliance with Conciliation Hall, its peerage or its priesthood.

The Spectator, 12 August 1848, p. 2.

¹ An Irish bull: a joke, or form of humour based on illogicality.

² Woefully.

Comment on the following document:

[...]

Mohill Union. – Major Halliday to the Commissioners, January 21, 1848: –

‘The number of names now on the outdoor relief list exceeds 3,000, and must be expected largely to increase for several weeks; but the relieving-officers have been able hitherto to avoid taking on it any able-bodied males, by offering to applicants of this class admission to the workhouse, *which is almost invariably declined.*

‘They all concur in stating, that if any of these shall be relieved out-of-doors, *they will universally throw themselves on the list, and abandon such employment as they at present can at times obtain from the farmers or otherwise.*’

The opinion reported by Major Halliday, in the last sentence, is remarkably confirmed by a circumstance which has come to our knowledge while these pages are passing through the press. A great proprietor in Kerry has directed a considerable sum to be employed there in drainage. He finds, however, the pauperism undiminished, and the explanation is, that those who have once received relief are spoilt for work. They are absolutely valueless as day-labourers, and if employed on task-work, throw up their little contracts, candidly confessing that they prefer their chance of union support. A friend of ours near Limerick, a few days ago, ordered four pairs of shoes. His shoemaker refused the order, as it might interfere with his relief.

Of course we could extend almost indefinitely these pictures of sloth, fraud, violence, and misery; for, long as these extracts are, they form a very minute portion of the vast Relief library before us. Enough, however – perhaps more than enough – has been produced to show the wisdom of Mr. Twistleton’s prophecy, ‘that it would be a fatal step to introduce any system of outdoor relief for the unemployed population of Ireland.’ Those who believe that a population in the state which now appears to be that of the southern and western Irish can safely be told that the fundamental law of human society has been repealed in their favour, and that, though they do not work, they yet shall eat; who believe that a people, such as the evidence now shows those of Munster and Connaught to be, will fight the anxious battle which man has to wage for subsistence, though they are told it is the duty of the ratepayers, and, in default of them, of that being of inexhaustible resources, the British Government, to assist them when they make inadequate efforts, and supply their place when they make none; – those who can believe all this, are beyond the reach of any arguments drawn from theory, or even from experience.

We may be asked, however (for it is a question we have often heard put), what else would you have done? – what do you propose to substitute? We are not sure that this is a question which an objector to outdoor relief for such a population is bound to answer. If we saw a man with a wound in his leg, busily employed in tearing it wider and deeper, we might be allowed to advise him to desist, without being required to direct his further proceedings. If he asked us what else he should do, we might be permitted to answer, ‘All that we know is, that what you are doing is wrong – that every time you tear that wound you inflame it. What you ought to do, or whether you ought to do anything, we will not venture to say; but, for Heaven’s sake, stop your hands in what you are about!’ [...]

Comment on the following document:

[...] I cannot, however, acquit the Government of all blame, in those matters I am now seeking to expose. This is not a year of famine; the people have starved in many hundreds, I believe, within the last twelvemonths, *in the face of an abundance of cheap food*. They have starved under the working of a law especially directed to meet the case of the destitute. I have no hesitation in adding my firm conviction, that very many have been *done to death* by pure tyranny. I have seen a very large amount of indisputable evidence, to the effect, that very many hundred evictions have been *illegally* carried out; death has again and again been the result. I do, therefore, charge the Government with this much of blame – the Guardians have been allowed to shirk the fair performance of their duties; the destitute have not had what the law professes to secure to them; the workhouses have not had the supervision they ought to have had; they have been suffered to be the places I have proved them to be, in the face of laws, and orders with the force of law, calling for a very different state of things. No executive dare defend the cruel and indecent crowding, the absence of clothing, the want of discipline, but too often the abuse of the diet table, which, alas! it is notorious, exists. It is nothing to tell me that there are Inspectors. I reply, how are these Inspectors supported, when they report as against the Board of Guardians? My own very strong impression is, that the Inspector who would persevere in reporting and remonstrating against the abuses of the law, perpetrated and sanctioned by the Guardians, would be considered in anything but a favourable light at the head-quarters of the Poor-law Department. The Inspector who goes on *comfortably* with his Board, however that Board may act, stands the best, I fear, in the graces of his superiors.

I cannot get rid of a very strong impression I entertain, that there has been a disposition to look at the difficulties of the crisis in these respects as so great, that there was a sort of tacit determination, to let things take their course, at any cost. If we were dealing with any animals, but those of our own kind, this would not surprise me; but I cannot admit, that any amount of expense, any amount of official interference, should be spared, to simply secure to the destitute, what the destitute have by law a right to demand. I repeat here, what I have said elsewhere, I do not know what the object of the “Rate-in-aid” Act was, except to provide, by extraordinary means, for an extraordinary state of things. As to the last year’s, and this year’s published figures, so far as they regard the diminution of pauperism, I hold them as of little value. If you take the decrease by death, and by emigration, and the real condition of the Western districts at this moment, I see no ground whatever to believe, that pauperism has decreased in degree. I think it, however, but just to say, that I fully believe the real condition of many in the Union Houses, has not, until now, been known at the seat of Government – *but it ought to have been*. [...]

Rev. Sidney Godolphin OSBORNE, *Gleanings in the West of Ireland*,
London: T. & W. Boone, 1850, pp. 254-256

Discuss the following topic:

“Providence and the Great Famine.”

Discuss the following topic:

“Reform and revolution in the Great Irish Famine.”

Discuss the following topic:

“Poverty and morality.”

Discuss the following statement:

“The Poor Law appears to be thoroughly naturalized in Ireland. Your lordship would have been delighted to have heard it spoken of as I have done, and that by persons who did not know me, and who praised it as having been the salvation of the country, exclaiming ‘what should we have done without it!’”

Sir George Nicholls to Lord John Russell, letter dated Dublin, 16th September 1853, quoted in Sir George Nicholls, *A History of the Irish Poor Law, in connexion with the Condition of the People*, first edition London: John Murray, 1856; this reprint New York: Augustus M. Kelley, 1967, p. 398.

Discuss the following statement:

“The Irish Famine of 1847 had results, social and political, that constitute it one of the most important events in Irish history for more than two hundred years. It is impossible for anyone who knew the country previous to that period, and who has thoughtfully studied it since, to avoid the conclusion that so much has been destroyed, or so greatly changed, that the Ireland of old times will be seen no more.”

Alexander Martin Sullivan, *New Ireland*, London: S. Low, Marston, Searle & Rivington, 1877 (Alexander Martin Sullivan was the sole proprietor and editor of *The Nation* from 1855 to 1876.)

Discuss the following statement:

“The introduction of the poor laws was followed at no distant interval by the fearful calamity of the Irish famine, a calamity which taught the proprietors what a terrible burthen a numerous tenantry might become. The abolition of the protective duty on corn introduced another element of disturbance in the arrangements of the Irish farms. Never had so many causes combined in so short a time to effect vital changes in the circumstances of the land occupiers of a country.”

Isaac Butt, *Land Tenure in Ireland; a plea for the Celtic race*. Dublin: J. Falconer, 1866 (third edition)

Discuss the following statement:

“The Christian duty of charity continued to dominate the actions of groups like the Quakers, but for many in Britain, philanthropic feelings existed alongside a strong desire to see the fundamental changes in Ireland they believed would prevent the need for continuous private generosity.”

Peter Gray, “The Triumph of Dogma: Ideology and Famine Relief”, *History Ireland*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (Summer 1995), p. 29

Discuss the following statement:

“The danger remains that much current and future scholarship on the Famine will make its mark in academic circles but not in the wider world where images of genocide will persist.”

Mary Daly, ‘Revisionism and the Great Irish Famine’, in D. George Boyce & Alan O’Day (eds.), *The Making of Modern Irish History: Revisionism and the Revisionist Controversy*, London: Routledge, (1996) 1997, p. 86.

Discuss the following statement:

“The experience of the famine, both then and later, became inextricably linked with the question of the Union and its reality, even its viability.”

D. George Boyce, *Nineteenth-Century Ireland: The Search for Stability*, Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, revised ed. 2005, p. 126

Discuss the following statement:

“The predominant academic view until the early 1990s was that while the official response to the Famine had often been shortsighted, nevertheless, the Famine was an unavoidable Malthusian catastrophe, a view underlying the contemporary official response.”

Patrick Maume, “Irish political history: guidelines and reflections”, in M. McAuliffe, K. O’Donnell and L. Lane (eds), *Palgrave Advances in Irish History*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, p. 14