Tim Pat Coogan points the finger of blame for the Great Famine at ministers in Lord Russell’s government, which came to power in 1846, and sees echoes of the disaster in the Republic’s current economic plight.

Ireland’s Path to Desolation

The Great Famine was the worst thing that ever happened to Ireland. Understandably, therefore, in Irish folk memory the catastrophe is viewed in sharply contrasting terms by every shade of opinion, ranging from those who think it was an English precursor to the Holocaust to those afflicted by colonial cringe who would argue that it was merely a 19th-century variant of the Scarsdale diet. The distinguished Irish-American historian Denis Clark (1927-93) said of the Great Famine:

The dimensions of the calamity can hardly be delineated by simple statistics. England had presided over an epochal disaster too monstrous and too impersonal to be a mere product of individual ill-will or the fiendish outcome of a well-planned conspiracy. It was something worse; the cumulative antagonism and corruption of the English ruling class was visited with crushing intensity on a long-enfeebled foe. It was as close to genocide as colonialism would come in the 19th century.

It did not nearly come close to genocide, it was genocide. The Famine meets the criteria laid down by the UN Convention. But it was visited on Ireland not, as Clark argues, as the result of cumulative antagonism by Britain’s ruling class, nor by the wish of a majority of the people of England, but by a section of the Whig government of the period.

The failure of the potato crop between 1845 and 1851 was used by some of the most influential Cabinet ministers, including Viscount Palmerston, to carry out ethnic cleansing in order to reduce uneconomic overpopulation on their vast Irish estates and to concentrate instead on profitable cattle rearing. In this savage endeavour they made use of support from opinion within the Anglican Church, which, led by The Times, seized upon the Famine as evidence that the potato blight was divine Providence, demonstrating God’s disapproved of Catholic Emancipation, and the fact that an increased grant had been given by the Peel government to Saint Patrick’s College, the major Catholic seminary at Maynooth.
The Famine had profound effects on both Ireland and England. One of the most significant turning points in Anglo-Irish relationships was Tony Blair’s starting of his Northern Ireland peace initiative by apologising for the Famine, though some critics thought it partial. The note Blair struck found a resonance in a suspicious IRA, which eventually began to accept that it could put its trust in him. On the other hand, in the US the huge Irish diaspora descended from Famine-fuelled emigration, through the Kennedys and the Clinton White House, was able to counter the traditional spheres of influence of the British Establishment the State Department and the Department of Justice, as well as the close relationship between the CIA and MI6, which Unionists and Conservatives had been able to rely on to counter the aspirations of Irish nationalism.

As the Queen’s visit to Ireland in 2011 helped to underline, the peace process has not only saved lives – an ironic outcome in view of the scale of Famine deaths – but placed Anglo-Irish relationships on a new and better footing. It is not an outcome one could have foreseen in 1979, when the IRA blew up the Queen’s uncle, Lord Mountbatten, citing the Famine as justification.

Hitherto there has been little clarity or discussion on the reasons for such hatred. As with other genocides, there was a guilty silence on the part of survivors, who felt that they should not have survived while others died. Moreover there was more well-founded guilt caused by the fact that some Catholic Irish did well out of the Famine at their neighbours’ expense. All these themes could have been disentangled long before now had Irish academic historians been able to face up to the reality of describing just what happened and why.

There were many reasons for this. First, most Irish historians received their training in English universities and, with an eye to future advancement, speedily learnt the art of sifting the trauma out of their country’s history. Second, laziness and inefficiency, both of which explain how what was intended as a major volume to commemorate the Famine’s centenary in 1945 came down to a collection of seven essays, taking 13 years to produce.

This collection, The Great Famine, which some Irish historians have termed a ‘great work’ and a template for all subsequent scholarship, only saw the light of day because one of the volume’s contributors, Kevin B. Nolawn, took it on himself to bully and badger contributors, ferret out articles where they had been left lying on shelves and finally wrote the book’s introduction himself.

As time progressed a more energetic generation of historians took over from the port and sirloin brigade. The conflict in Northern Ireland had among its many unwelcome results the fact that Irish history became part of the psy-war. In this arena the IRA sought to derive, and their opponents to prevent, ideological aid and comfort from the past.

Once again the Famine was relegated to the historical backburner, to an extent that a number of people in both Ireland and England initially wondered what Tony Blair was on about in his apology. Indignant academics shuffled into television studios to deplore a tendency to apologise for things in the past that had no bearing on the present and were nobody’s fault to begin with.

Major Irish-American historians, such as James Donnelly or Kirby Miller, soared above such fawning, as did an English woman whose work shines through the ages, Cecil Woodham-Smith. But in the groves of academe on both sides of the Irish Sea cap-touching was the favoured indoor sport.

Before examining culpability, let us remind ourselves of the impact of the ‘Great Hunger’. It can be guessed at by looking at famines such as that which occurred in Darfur at the end of the 20th century, claiming the lives of a quarter of a million people. Dreadful as this was, it occurred in a population of 19 million.

At the time the Famine began in Ireland, the population was tending towards nine million, the official statistics put this figure nearer to eight million but statistics about the Famine can not be trusted. The general assumption until relatively recently was that between the census of 1841 and that of 1851 the Irish population fell by some two million. Deaths directly attributable to the Famine accounted for approximately one million and emigration for the rest.
One of the most respected authorities on the Famine, Joel Mokyr, has calculated that because of averted births (that is, births which did not take place as a result of famine), because whole families died and because there was no one left to record their passing, as many as one million more died than official accounts suggest.

Official Famine figures have to be treated with caution. In 1848 Trevelyan published a book, *The Irish Crisis*, justifying his handiwork, claiming that the Famine had ended that year. In fact it had three more deadly years to run. One also has to take into account factors such as the completely inadequate Irish road system of the time. Some of the worst Famine-hit areas, the province of Connacht in the West of Ireland, for example, were so deficient in roads and harbours that such relief as there was could not be brought to the starving, who died in dwellings that were no more than caves cut into the bog. Official British government policy was directly responsible for the dire state of rural Ireland, which did not encourage the compilation of damaging and damning statistics.

Before the Great Famine several smaller famines had occurred and 'Irish distress' was a staple of parliamentary committees. The horrific poverty of the peasantry was well known but no action was taken. Speaking on the eve of the Famine Lord Grey said: 'Ireland is our disgrace. It is the reproach, the standing disgrace, of this country that Ireland remains in the condition she is. It is so regarded throughout the whole civilised world.'

The reality of which Grey spoke was one in which some two thirds of the population lived in mud huts or gerry-built cabins from which smoke escaped through a hole in the roof, had no windows and only one door. Almost three million people lived on scraps of land rented either directly from landlads, via their agents, or from 'middlesmen' who took large sections of land from landlads and then rented them out in tiny and expensive plots from which life could only be sustained by means of a single crop, the potato.

In Dublin society settled into decadence as best it could. Social life revolved around the country's administrative centre, Dublin Castle, while real power resided in London, where the divided and largely impotent Irish parties – amounting to less than a fifth of the House of Commons – made little or no impact on events. By the time the potato blight struck in August 1845 the energetic, the skilled and the ambitious had flowed out of Ireland either to 'the mainland' or to the colonies, Canada and the US.

The 1798 Rebellion had provided the pretext for the obliteration of the Irish parliament and the subsuming of Ireland into the union as a full partner, supposedly, of Scotland and Wales. However when famine struck the partnership dissolved in fact though not in name and the political slogan became 'Irish property must pay for Irish poverty'.

Rent evictions soared. 'Natural causes' decreed that, if you turned a half-naked family out on the side of a road in a January sleet storm, granny and the weaker children would die relatively quickly, particularly if they received no food, and the mother, father and the rest of the family could be expected to follow at a decent interval. When dismay was registered at Cabinet at the news from Ireland, Palmerston is on record as saying bluntly that everyone knew that the Irish land situation could never be rectified until the surplus population was got rid of. The Cabinet’s reaction was to shudder and turn to other business. Fellow Irish estate-owning ministers, Lords Clanrickard and Lansdowne, did not merely rely on 'natural causes', they shoed tenants off their estates by the thousand into 'coffin ships', which disgorged those who survived the Atlantic crossing into the slums and snows of North America.

When Peel was ousted by the Whigs after a parliamentary ambush engineered by Disraeli on an Irish Coercion Bill, the administration of Irish relief passed into Trevelyan’s hands. Trevelyan was a Whig and his handiwork, claiming that the Famine had ended that year. In fact it had three more deadly years to run. One also has to take into account factors such as the completely inadequate Irish road system of the time. Some of the worst Famine-hit areas, the province of Connacht in the West of Ireland, for example, were so deficient in roads and harbours that such relief as there was could not be brought to the starving, who died in dwellings that were no more than caves cut into the bog. Official British government policy was directly responsible for the dire state of rural Ireland, which did not encourage the compilation of damaging and damning statistics.

Trevelyan suggested (and Woods presided over) a relief programme that depended on a completely inadequate supply of workhouses and of roadworks. The roads led nowhere, frequently tore up existing paths and employed starving men and women to build them in appalling conditions. Payment was made on completion of set tasks and, when thick snow and ice made roadworks impossible, people simply died a little quicker than they had already on the scheme's inadequate wages. Other more humane relief measures, such as soup kitchens and food depots, were terminated.

Trevelyan and Woods were not merely inspired by haughty Protestantism and a distaste for the Irish but reinforced their policies with the teaching of Malthus and other political economists, who saw the Irish peasantry as a constant threat to English prosperity and pride. Squalid, starving Ireland was made to contrast the ills of Popery with the achievements of innovative, bustling Victorian England.

A modicum of solace could derive from the story of the Famine if it could be believed, as Blair did, that lessons were learned. But were they? This melancholy tale stirs unease for contemporary Ireland, bent to the lash of today's political economists as she struggles to pay off the demands of the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund.
