

**Harriet Martineau, Nassau Senior
and Poor Law Reform**

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Introduction

This paper is concerned with political economists and Poor Law reform with a particular focus on the years leading up to the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834. After the passage of the Act the term the ‘Old Poor Law’ came to be used to refer to any aspect of poor relief between the first Act of Elizabeth I in 1597 up until 1834, and the reforms introduced that year became the New Poor Law.¹

The paper’s main focus is on the work of Nassau Senior and Harriet Martineau who presented economic arguments in the years immediately preceding the 1834 Act. Nassau Senior is important in two ways. First for the 1829 debate in correspondence with Malthus on population which marks a serious breach with Malthus’s approach. Secondly, for his work with the Whig Government of Lord Grey for whom he produced several reports, and at whose request he became perhaps the most influential member of the Poor Law Commission established to investigate the operation of the laws. During the course of Senior’s work in this period there was a clear shift of emphasis from the supply side to the demand side; from a main concern about population to increasing emphasis on the wages fund – how it could be maintained and enlarged by increasing productivity.

Harriet Martineau is important for her two tales on the Poor Law in the *Illustrations of Political Economy*, and the four tales in the *Poor Laws and Paupers Illustrated* series which were commissioned by Lord Brougham to aid the work of the Poor Law Commission. All six, but especially the four poor law tales, were influenced by the work of Nassau Senior. Moreover, Senior used to visit Harriet Martineau in London and discuss the questions of the Poor Law and Ireland with her.²

I argue that this is a unique case in the nineteenth century of a major political economist and a populariser of economics discussing, sharing information and working at the same time on a highly important piece of social legislation.

In Section 1, I examine Nassau Senior’s views on population in his *Two Lectures on Population, to which is added, a Correspondence between the Author and the Rev. T. R. Malthus*. Section 2 reviews the contribution of Malthus, Ricardo and McCulloch to the debate. In section 3, I examine Nassau Senior’s early involvement in policy. Section 4 outlines and discusses his views on the Poor Laws and his role on the Commission. In section 5 Harriet Martineau’s two tales *Cousin Marshall* and *Ireland* (both from the *Illustrations*) are considered. In section 6 I discuss Harriet Martineau’s link with the Commission and two of the *Poor Law and Paupers* tales – *The Parish* and *The Hamlets*. Section 7 presents some concluding comments.

¹ Brundage (2002, p.7).

² See Harriet Martineau *Autobiography* (2010), p 415.

1 Nassau Senior on Population

Nassau Senior was the first Classical economist to argue strongly against the Malthusian orthodoxy and in order to gain a clear picture of Nassau Senior's role in the theoretical debate on the Poor Laws and his practical involvement in the Poor Law Commission we must examine his debate with Malthus. In 1829, he published *Two Lectures on Population, to which is added a correspondence between the author and the Rev. T. R. Malthus*. The lectures were numbers 7 and 8 of Lecture Course II delivered in Oxford Easter Term 1828. The first strand of Senior's argument in the lectures was that the desire of man to improve his position himself was at least as important as sexual desire:

The fear of losing decencies, or perhaps more frequently the hope to acquire, by a longer accumulation during celibacy the means of purchasing the decencies of a higher social rank, is a check of far more importance. Want of actual necessaries is seldom apprehended by any except the poorest classes in any country. And in England, though it sometimes is felt, it probably is anticipated by none. (1829, II pp.26-27).³

He was quite clear that this went against the prevailing orthodoxy. While in abstract terms the population may have the tendency to outrun the means of subsistence he denied 'that under wise institutions, there is any tendency to this state of things' and believed 'the tendency to be just the reverse' (1829, II pp.35-36).⁴

As Bowley (1937, pp119-120) has argued, Senior regarded Malthus's Law of Population as incomplete because he held that population had a tendency to increase faster than subsistence in the absence of either positive or negative checks as if this actually had happened. In the second of the two Lectures Senior argued that although in almost all countries most people were 'poor and miserable' their original savage state had been the same. Therefore what could we conclude about the Malthusian tendency for numbers to increase faster than subsistence? But if we found a single country where there is less poverty than in a savage state we could conclude that the means of subsistence had increased faster than population in that country. In fact he went on to argue that now this is the case in *every* civilized country, including poverty stricken Ireland:

Even Ireland, the country most likely to afford an instance of what Mr. Mill supposes to be the natural course of things, poor and populous as she is, suffers less from want with her eight millions of people, than when her only inhabitants were a few sept⁵ of hunters and fishers. In our early history, famines, and pestilences the consequences of famine, constantly recur. At present, though our numbers are trebled or quadrupled, they are unheard of (1829, II p 48).

In his letter to Malthus of March 15th 1829 reproduced in the Lectures, Senior argued that Malthus's argument was opposed by the tendency of man to try to better himself:

You would still say, that in the absence of disturbing causes, population has a *tendency* to increase faster than food, because the comparative increase of the former is a mere compliance with our natural wishes, the comparative increase of the latter is all effort and self-denial. I should still say, that, in the absence of disturbing causes, food has a tendency to increase faster than population, because, in fact, it

³ For the full passage, see Appendix 1 item 1.

⁴ For the full passage, see Appendix 1 item 2.

⁵ Sept is the Irish word for clan.

has generally done so, and because I consider the desire of bettering our condition as natural a wish as the desire of marriage (1829, p.58).

The second strand in Senior's argument in the *Lectures* is that productivity in agriculture may increase with population and offset the tendency towards diminishing returns. Picking up the theme of his March 15th letter in another to Malthus dated March 26th 1829, Senior argued that when he said 'subsistence *has generally* increased in a greater ratio than population' (p. 73), he meant that looking back through the history of the whole world, and comparing the state of each country every two or three hundred years one can see that there have been periods where subsistence has grown faster than population for a number of reasons, including mechanical inventions and improved modes of cultivation and transport. These periods may be followed by periods where population growth exceeds the growth of subsistence, but the 'retrogression would not be to the point at which food and population relatively stood before' (p.75). Thus, there may be a 'ratchet effect' at work leading to rising living standards over time.

Malthus did not accept these arguments. He replied with self evidently true arguments:

If food had increased faster than population, would the earth have been overspread with people since the flood? Would the great migrations and movements of nations of which we read have ever taken place? Would the shepherds of Asia have been engaged in such a constant struggle for room and food? Would the northern nations have ever overrun the Roman empire of the west? Would the civilized Greeks have been obliged to send out numerous colonies? Would these colonies have increased with great rapidity for a certain period, and then have become comparatively stationary? Would history, in short, have been at all what it is? (1829, App. p 66).

As Routh argues, all that Senior needed to reply to this was 'Yes'. Routh goes on to point to what was a 'dreadful heresy for an economist writing under the shadow of Malthus' (1975, p150). He argues that although it conformed with the evidence that they could see of rising living standards, this did not make the orthodox Malthusians any readier to accept Senior's arguments.

Although in the letters both authors affected to have come to terms with each other's views, Bowley makes it clear that they did not fundamentally agree. As she put it 'there was a real difference in outlook that no amount of beating about the bush could conceal' (1937, p122).

Why then did Senior adopt this 'heretical' position? There was some empirical evidence. Thus Barton argued in *An Inquiry into the Causes of the Progressive Depreciation of Agricultural Labour* (1820, pp.40-43), that it was not a rising birth rate but a falling death rate which was responsible for the increase in population. It was also true that wealth was rising.⁶ Routh argues that Malthusianism was a doctrine which was likely to 'enrage rather than subdue the rick-burning, machine wrecking mobs that were beginning to terrify and terrorise farmers and manufacturers and against whom the agencies of law and order offered a very uncertain defence' (1975, p151).

⁶ Routh (1975, p151) refers to B R Mitchell, *The Fontana Economic History of Europe, Statistical Appendix 1700-1914* (1971). Between 1801 and 1831, British GNP at current prices rose 45%, consumer prices fell by about 40%, and population rose by 55%, so that real GNP per head had risen by 56% in 30 years.

The important point about Senior's views on population is that they went on to underpin his approach to the Poor Law and his role and contribution to Poor Law reform.

2 Old Poor Law and the Classical Economists

The Old Poor Law

Anthony Brundage has provided one of the best summaries of how the Old Poor Law worked:

The day-to-day business of dealing with applicants for relief was placed in the hands of annually named overseers, mostly drawn from the ranks of farmers and shopkeepers, who had a close knowledge of the character and needs of the parish poor. The gentry, in their capacity as magistrates, played a supervisory role and provided a place of appeal for the poor. Their greater leisure, experience and education gave them a wider perspective than that of most overseers, while their involvement with parliamentary politics made it possible for them to devise and implement corrective legislation. The system not only controlled the poor but also enhanced the notion of hierarchy, bolstered by the ethos of paternalism which was its corollary, and provided an efficient feedback into the national lawmaking system (1978, pp1-2).

Brundage was quick to point out that the Poor law was not a 'system' if the term implies uniformity. Indeed, as Poynter argues 'lack of uniformity was...the essence of the Poor Law...being rather a multitude of practices within (and sometimes without) the framework of a complicated aggregation of law.⁷ The main purpose of the laws of 1597 and 1601 and many following statutes was to provide relief for the 'aged, infirm and impotent and set the 'industrious poor' to work.⁸

The Old Poor Law worked reasonably well in a largely rural agricultural society. Industrialisation brought challenges to the system as population began to grow and there was a need for increased mobility as people moved to the towns. The Elizabethan Act of 1601 had expressed the need for 'necessary places of Habitation' for 'poor impotent people'.⁹ Over time able-bodied people were forced in to workhouses as a means of forcing work from the idle and dissolute. In the 1780s and 1790s in the wake of the American and French Revolutions and with extra pressure from poor harvests various pieces of legislation were brought in to ameliorate conditions and to relieve any revolutionary potential. Liberal changes were made forbidding the able-bodied to be put in to the workhouse and to require authorities to pay outdoor relief or allowances.¹⁰

By the 1820s two key problems had emerged. One was the continuing burden of the poor rates¹¹ and the resultant pauperisation of the labouring classes due to the increase in relief

⁷ See Poynter (1969, p.1).

⁸ See Brundage (2002, p1).

⁹ See Brundage (2002, p.11)

¹⁰ In 1782, Thomas Gilbert MP for Lichfield presented a bill in parliament which empowered parishes to join together in poor law unions in order to build and maintain workhouses. Able-bodied workers were to be excluded from these union workhouses. An Act of 1795 allowed parishes to order outdoor relief and a further Act of 1796 excluded able-bodied labourers from all workhouses. See Poynter (1969, pp. 76-85) and Brundage (2002, pp.21-27).

¹¹ Finer (1952, p 42) argues that the poor rate had increased from £1.5 million in 1775 to £8 million in 1818 and was still £7 million in 1832 despite a fall in the price of bread by a third.

to the able-bodied (including children).¹² The second was the scale of abuse and corruption in the system.¹³ The riots in 1830 were engendered by decades of change in the countryside – the enclosure movement, increased mechanisation leading to the disappearance of cottage industry, among others.¹⁴ Gradually grievances appeared concerning the poor laws, leading to attacks on the homes of overseers and destruction of workhouses.¹⁵ The government felt compelled to do something. Himmelfarb has argued that ‘poor law reformers came in all shapes and sizes.... and differed radically in their attitudes to the poor....[b]ut they agreed on the urgency of the problem. The problem was the pauperization of the poor, the solution the removal of the poor from the fatal contamination of the pauper’ (1985, p.175).¹⁶

Unlike some later political economists, Adam Smith was not opposed to the system of poor relief although he objected to the settlement laws. Like Malthus, later, he assumed a continuum of pauper and poor; but unlike Malthus and some others who were concerned that the poor would move down to the status of pauper, Smith’s ‘poor, even the very poor, were expected to move gradually to the upper end of the spectrum as the economy expanded and progressed’.¹⁷ Indeed Smith took a positive view of high wages for the labourer arguing that this would lead to greater industry and the ‘comfortable hope of bettering his condition’.¹⁸

Bentham had a lot to say about the poor laws and unlike Smith was an influence on both Senior and Chadwick. Moreover, Bentham made specific proposals some of which are deemed to have influenced the debate in the nineteenth century. For example, Bentham was probably the originator of the principle of ‘less eligibility’:

If the condition of persons *maintained* without property by *the labour of others* were rendered more eligible than that of persons maintained by their *own* labour then, in proportion as the existence of this state of things were ascertained, individuals destitute of property would be continually withdrawing themselves from the class of person maintained by their own labour, to the class of persons maintained by the labour of others: and the sort of idleness, which at present is more or less *confined* to persons of

¹² Blaug (1963, pp161-2; 1964, p.242) has argued that, on the contrary, low wages were the reason for the adoption of outdoor relief rather than the *effect* of outdoor relief. He argued that, contrary to the received view at the time, ‘[t]he Old Poor Law, with its use of outdoor relief to assist the underpaid and to relieve the unemployed was, in essence, a device for dealing with the problem of surplus labour in the lagging rural sector of a rapidly expanding but still underdeveloped economy’ (1963, p.176). See Boyer (1990, pp.75-84) on Blaug’s contributions and other ‘revisionist’ analyses of the Poor Law.

¹³ See Finer, (1952, p41-42).

¹⁴ See Hobsbawm and Rudé, (1969) for a full discussion.

¹⁵ See Brundage, (2002, pp57-60) and Hobsbawm and Rudé, (1969) chapter 5 pages 97-113 ‘The Riots in the South-East’.

¹⁶ The shapes and sizes included ‘utilitarians and Unitarians, Evangelicals and orthodox Anglicans, Dissenters and atheists, Whigs and Tories, manufacturers and landlords, countrymen and townsfolk, preachers and philosophers, philanthropists and politicians’, see Himmelfarb (1985, p175).

¹⁷ Himmelfarb (2008, pp. 59-60). See Smith passage (1981, p.96) – number 3 in Appendix 1. Himmelfarb (2008, pp.59-62) argues that ‘Smith refuted in advance Malthus’s theory that the growth of population inevitably resulted in the “misery and vice” of the lower classes.

¹⁸ Himmelfarb (2008, p. 61). Smith (1981, p.99) – see full passage number 4 in Appendix 1.

independent fortune, would thus extend itself sooner or later to every individual...till at last there would be *nobody* left to labour at all for anybody (1796, p.39).¹⁹

Bentham also developed an idea for a model prison – the Panopticon – the circular design of which would enable prison officers to see everything that is going on. In papers written in 1797-98 ('Pauper Management Improved'; 'Situation and Relief of the Poor' and 'Outline of a work entitled Pauper Management Improved'), Bentham proposed the provision of poor relief in 250 Panopticon style workhouses, each accommodating 2,000 people, owned and managed by a joint-stock company, the National Charity Company. This idea, rejected at the time, influenced later ideas on the management of the Poor Law and unions of parishes.²⁰

Dennis O'Brien has argued that in relation to the Old Poor Law the later political economists divided into three groups. There were the abolitionists – Malthus and Ricardo; those like McCulloch who believed in retaining the Old Poor Law with changes; and those led by Nassau Senior who regarded abolition as impracticable but were in favour of drastic reform.

Malthus

In the first edition of the *Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798), Malthus argued that the Poor Laws tended to depress the general condition of the poor in two ways. First, he argued that they tend to increase population without increasing the food for its support.²¹ Secondly, he maintained that the consumption of goods in the workhouses reduces the quantity left for workers outside.²² He went on to say that there was a spirit of independence among the peasantry and the Poor Laws tend to eradicate this spirit leading to men marrying when they could not afford to:²³

¹⁹ Quoted in Poynter (1969, pp.125-126). Chadwick appears to have claimed authorship of the concept but this is open to dispute; see Poynter (1969, p.126) and Fraser (2009, pp. 53-56) for further discussion.

²⁰ See Fraser (2009, pp. 54-56); Halevy (1972, pp. 82-87); Poynter (1969, pp.117-144). Webb has argued that Martineau knew some of Bentham's work and admired it but that she was not a Benthamite – the true Benthamite was 'rigorous and precise, a legal and administrative reformer. Harriet Martineau was doctrinaire, utopian, and woolly.... Her instrument was not calculation but principle. Once found, principle had to be acted upon, with no alternatives considered' (1960, pp.89-90). Nevertheless it is of note that the last words of the *Illustrations* series were as follows: 'therefore shall the heaven-born spirit be trusted while revealing and announcing at once the means and the end – THE EMPLOYMENT OF ALL POWERS AND ALL MATERIALS, THE NATURAL RECOMPENSES OF ALL ACTIONS, AND THE CONSEQUENT ACCOMPLISHMENT OF THE HAPPINESS OF THE GREATEST NUMBER, IF NOT OF ALL' (1834a, p.144.).

²¹ 'Their first obvious tendency is to increase population without increasing the food for its support. A poor man may marry with little or no prospect of being able to support a family in independence. They may be said therefore in some measure to create the poor which they maintain; and as the provisions of the country must, in consequence of the increased population, be distributed to every man in smaller proportions, it is evident that the labour of those who are not supported by parish assistance, will purchase a smaller quantity of provisions than before, and consequently more of them must be driven to ask for support' (1798, p.26).

²² 'Secondly, the quantity of provisions consumed in workhouses upon a part of the society, that cannot in general be considered as the most valuable part, diminishes the shares that would otherwise belong to more industrious and more worthy members; and thus in the same manner forces more to become dependent. If the poor in the workhouses were to live better than they now do, this new distribution of the money of the society would tend more conspicuously to depress the condition of those out of the workhouses by occasioning a rise in the price of provisions' (1798 p.26).

²³ References to the later editions of Malthus's *Essay* are to the 1826 edition published by John Murray.

If men are induced to marry from a prospect of parish provision, with little or no chance of maintaining their families in independence, they are not only unjustly tempted to bring unhappiness and dependence upon themselves and children; but they are tempted, without knowing it, to injure all in the same class with themselves. A labourer who marries without being able to support a family may in some respects be considered as an enemy to all his fellow-labourers (1798, V, p.27)

The effect of increasing the demand for food without increasing its output was to raise the price of provisions and thereby to impoverish the labouring classes as a whole. The Poor Laws he went on to argue also reduce the ability and willingness to save by working people:

Their present wants employ their whole attention, and they seldom think of the future. Even when they have an opportunity of saving they seldom exercise it; but all that is beyond their present necessities goes, generally speaking, to the ale-house....it is difficult to conceive that these men would not save a part of their high wages for the future support of their families, instead of spending it in drunkenness and dissipation, if they did not rely on parish assistance for support in case of accidents. And that the poor employed in manufactures consider this assistance as a reason why they may spend all the wages they earn, and enjoy themselves while they can, appears to be evident from the number of families that, upon the failure of any great manufactory, immediately fall upon the parish; when perhaps the wages earned in this manufactory, while it flourished, were sufficiently above the price of common country labour, to have allowed them to save enough for their support till they could find some other channel for their industry...A man who might not be deterred from going to the ale-house, from the consideration that on his death, or sickness, he should leave his wife and family upon the parish, might yet hesitate in thus dissipating his earnings, if he were assured that, in either of these cases, his family must starve, or be left to the support of casual bounty (1798, V, p.27).

In the expanded Great Quarto edition of 1803 Malthus put forward his plan for the gradual abolition of the Poor Laws. He began by asserting that since parish relief simply results in a rise in the price of provisions, no one had the right to what could not be produced, arguing that 'it must be allowed that we have practised an unpardonable deceit upon the poor, and have promised what we have been very far from performing' (1826, vol. 2 p.91). To make this point absolutely clear, in the edition of 1806 he added a further passage, maintaining that we are bound in justice and honour formally to disclaim the *right* of the poor to support (1826, p.337).²⁴ His plan was quite simply 'the gradual and very gradual abolition of the poor-laws' (1826, p.109) which he explained later in the volume:

To this end, I should propose a regulation to be made, declaring, that no child born from any marriage, taking place after the expiration of a year from the date of the law, and no illegitimate child born two years from the same date, should ever be entitled to parish assistance. And to give a more general knowledge of this law, and to enforce it more strongly on the minds of the lower classes of people, the clergyman of each parish should, after the publication of banns, read a short address, stating the strong obligation on every man to support his own children; the impropriety, and even immorality, of marrying without a prospect of being able to do this; the evils which had resulted to the poor themselves from the attempt which had been made to assist by public institutions in a duty which ought to be exclusively appropriated to parents; and the absolute necessity which had at length appeared of abandoning all such institutions, on account of their producing effects totally opposite to those which were intended (1826, p338).

²⁴ See James (1979 p.130).

Patricia James traces the reactions to this by people of whom ‘some laughed and others were horrified’.²⁵ While it professed to be gradual some would be left entirely without relief alongside others who received it.

Ricardo

Ricardo believed that ‘[l]ike all other contracts, wages should be left to the fair and free competition of the market, and should never be controlled by the interference of the legislature’ (1951, I, p.105) In the *Principles of Political Economy*, 1817 (1951) he argued, that the Poor Laws worked against these principles with serious unintended consequences:

...it is not, as the legislature benevolently intended, to amend the condition of the poor, but to deteriorate the condition of both poor and rich; instead of making the poor rich, they are calculated to make the rich poor; and whilst the present laws are in force, it is quite in the natural order of things that the fund for the maintenance of the poor should progressively increase till it has absorbed all the net revenue of the country, or at least so much of it as the state shall leave to us, after satisfying its own never-failing demands for the public expenditure (1951, pp105-6).

In the next sentence Ricardo allies himself firmly with Malthus:

This pernicious tendency of these laws is no longer a mystery, since it has been fully developed by the able hand of Mr Malthus; and every friend to the poor must ardently wish for their abolition (1951, p106).

While arguing for abolition Ricardo pleaded caution:

Unfortunately, however, they have been so long established, and the habits of the poor have been so formed upon their operation, that to eradicate them with safety from our political system, requires the most cautious and skilful management. It is agreed by all who are most friendly to a repeal of these laws, that if it be desirable to prevent the most overwhelming distress to those for whose benefit they were erroneously enacted, their abolition should be effected by the most gradual steps (1951, p106)

The nature of the gradual abolition is then sketched out and Ricardo uses the population argument to maintain that ‘the comforts and well-being of the poor cannot be permanently secured without some regard on their part, or some effort on the part of the legislature, to regulate the increase of their numbers, and to render less frequent among them early and improvident marriages’ (1951, pp. 106-107). He goes on to argue:

The operation of the system of poor laws has been directly contrary to this. They have rendered restraint superfluous, and have invited imprudence, by offering it a portion of the wages of prudence and industry (1951, p107).

Ricardo goes on to outline the way forward:

By gradually contracting the sphere of the poor laws; by impressing on the poor the value of independence, by teaching them that they must look not to systematic or casual charity, but to their own exertions for support, that prudence and fore-thought are neither unnecessary nor unprofitable virtues, we shall by degrees approach a sounder and more healthful state (1951, p107).

Thus the Poor Laws would gradually be reduced in scope but in case anyone had any doubts Ricardo went on to reaffirm that ‘[n]o scheme for the amendment of the poor laws merits the least attention, which has not their abolition for its ultimate object’.

²⁵ See James (1979, p.130)

Ricardo was concerned about the consequences of the plan and how it was to be carried out 'with the most security, and at the same time with the least violence'. He was clear that any alternative plan would serve no purpose including a fund 'levied according to some late proposals, as a general fund from the country at large'. Although the existing arrangements were undesirable, he argued that their local nature had served to minimize the damage because there were local incentives to keep rates low and to maintain a 'sparing distribution of relief'.²⁶

McCulloch

Dennis O'Brien has carefully and meticulously traced the development of J R McCulloch's views on the Poor Laws and I will provide a brief summary here.²⁷ O'Brien explains that until 1826 McCulloch's views were almost entirely hostile based on the ideas of Malthus and Ricardo. McCulloch, in his *Principles*, emphasized that the consequence of the Poor Laws was to make the poor even worse off. This effect worked through the labour market and he made use of population theory in discussing the system of making up low wages with 'allowances' from the rates. The consequences of this were that the 'Poor Laws teach the labourer to consider it as indifferent whether his wages will suffice for the support of a family or not - that, if they are insufficient, the deficit will be made up from the parish funds, and thus remove the natural and most powerful check to over-population (1825, p.188). McCulloch went on to argue that 'the only means for the permanent improvement of the poor' would be 'the establishment of a really useful system of public education' so that they would become acquainted with the 'circumstances that really determine their condition' (1825, p.189).

In 1826 McCulloch changed his mind. He was increasingly concerned about maintaining social order if the Poor Laws were abolished. He became convinced that the original Old Poor Law had worked satisfactorily until the introduction of outdoor relief from the 1780s onwards.²⁸ He argued that it was neither practicable nor advisable to refuse relief to the able-bodied poor. He therefore opposed the New Poor Law of 1834 and maintained that all that was necessary was to return to the pre-1782 system.²⁹

²⁶ See Ricardo (1951, pp107-8). However he concludes with a final firm restatement and warning: 'The principle of gravitation is not more certain than the tendency of such laws to change wealth and power into misery and weakness; to call away the exertions of labour from every object, except that of providing mere subsistence; to confound all intellectual distinction; to busy the mind continually in supplying the body's wants; until at last all classes should be infected with the plague of universal poverty. Happily, these laws have been in operation during a period of progressive prosperity, when the funds for the maintenance of labour have regularly increased, and when an increase of population would be naturally called for. But if our progress should become more slow; if we should attain the stationary state, from which I trust we are yet far distant, then will the pernicious nature of these laws become more manifest and alarming; and then, too, will their removal be obstructed by many additional difficulties' (1951, pp108-9).

²⁷ O'Brien (1975, pp. 337-339).

²⁸ See Cowherd (1977, pp.154-201).

²⁹ See above pp.5-6, and footnote 10.

3 Nassau Senior: Early Involvement in Policy

Marion Bowley has argued that there is good evidence to suggest that Senior became an economist because he wanted to reform the Poor Law. Although originally from a conservative (Tory) background Senior had views consistent with Whiggism. Levy argues that his sources for this were ‘his strong religious and economic convictions, largely resulting from the possession of an acutely logical intellect coupled with an ardent desire and determination for social betterment’ (1970, p. 68). Bowley argues that from the time Senior finished his first period as Drummond Professor of Political Economy at Oxford in 1830 he had effectively become a member of the Whig party and an adviser on economic policy.³⁰ Thus, as we shall see below, he was asked by Lord Melbourne to investigate the law on combinations, by Lord Howick to investigate the problems of poor relief in Ireland and he became (as a result of Howick’s influence) a leading member of the Poor Law Commission.

In the summer of 1830 there were widespread revolts in the southern counties, with burning of corn-ricks and mills and destruction of machinery.³¹ Senior published *Three Lectures on the Rate of Wages* in which he put the cause of these disturbances down to the Poor Laws and he analyses this in terms of the wages fund doctrine. The Poor Laws have encouraged idleness and inefficiency which reduces the wages fund and if the workers destroy the corn-ricks they destroy the fund for future wages. If they destroy machinery they destroy the means by which their work is made more productive and which will therefore increase the wages fund. He argues that this was a short run problem which could not be solved by recourse to the argument for population restraint for this would take too long and therefore emigration must be encouraged. At the same time there was a move in the manufacturing districts to unite all employees in key industries in one Grand Trades Union. In Manchester the colliers had gone on strike and with coal deliveries stopped the mills might close.

As soon as Lord Melbourne came into office he asked Senior to look at the question of the law of combinations in 1830. In his memorandum to Melbourne Senior says:

We believe that it is the duty of the State to protect that property and that right, and that it may be guilty of a breach of duty by acts of commission or of omission. By acts of omission, if it does not protect the labourer from injury on the part of those who assume to dictate to him what he shall do and what he shall not do; by acts of commission, if it assume itself to dictate to him, and to force him to pursue or to abandon a given proceeding, not on the ground that he is interfering with the free will of another, but because his conduct may be detrimental to himself, or to his master, or to the general wealth of the society. *We believe, in short, that in this, as in almost every other matter, the duty of the Government is simply to keep the peace, to protect all its subjects from the violence and fraud and malice of one another, and, having done so, to leave them to pursue what they believe to be in their interests in the way which they deem advisable.* (Senior 1865, Vol II, pp. 121-2).³²

³⁰ See Bowley (1970 p.190).

³¹ The disturbances were very widespread – from Lincolnshire to Dorset. See Hobsbawm and Rudé, (1969, pp.173-192).

³² Included in the Report of the Commission on the Condition of the Hand-loom Weavers, (1841, p. 98) and reprinted in his Historical and Philosophical Essays, (1865, Vol. II, pp. 121-2). My italics.

Senior concluded that the law should be left as it was but that there should be increases in punishment for the use of violence or intimidation, prohibition of picketing and other strong measures.³³

The narrow view of the scope for government in the passage above contrasts vividly with his views on the Irish poor only a year later. Lord Howick (eldest son of the Prime Minister Charles Grey) suggested to Senior that he examine the question of the advisability of enacting legislation for compulsory relief of the poor (poor laws) in Ireland. Consequently Senior sent Howick a long letter in July 1831 dealing with the matter and the role of government is immediately seen in a different light:

It still must be admitted that the state of the lower classes in Ireland is inferior not merely to the situation which appears within the power of the labouring population of a country to attain, but even to the situation which in some countries - countries less favoured by nature than Ireland - has actually been attained by that class. And if this be admitted, it becomes our duty most anxiously to inquire how far the remedy for this evil lies within the province of the Government (1831, pp.6-7).

Senior went on to recommend that public resources be allocated to combating infectious disease, improving medical services, providing relief for those suffering from disabling diseases and accidents, and for the support for orphans. In all cases Senior's yardstick in this discussion was whether public provision could be enacted without materially affecting the three great supports of human existence - 'industry, forethought, and charity' (1831, p.11). Senior has gone from a position of laissez faire with regard to combinations to one of alleviation of distress as long as these three great supports are not diminished. Against this yardstick, however, he was not in favour of support for deserted or illegitimate children – these were circumstances which were foreseeable and would also encourage absconding parents. Similarly, he was against support for old age which he also regarded as foreseeable and help here would diminish 'prudence and industry'. While Senior was sympathetic to the poverty of the able-bodied due to illness or crop failure he was against the use of Allowances as under the English Poor Law these had created the greatest difficulties:

The relief of the able-bodied is . . . the grand abuse of the English Poor Laws - the source from which all their other abuses have flowed it must diminish industry by making subsistence independent of exertion.³⁴

³³ The report proposed very draconian changes in the legislation which would have virtually prohibited unions. The report was regarded as politically impossible and was not acted upon. A draft of the *Report on Combinations*, dated August 21 1832, is in the *Nassau Senior Collection*, the National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth.

³⁴ This passage quoted in Levy (1970, p. 81) is from the 3rd edition of *The Letter to Howick*, published in January 1832. The full quote in Levy is: 'The relief of the able-bodied is . . . the grand abuse of the English Poor Laws - the source from which all their other abuses have flowed . . . Where once it has been established, the payment of wages out of rates; the inequality of the wages of the married and the single; the equality of the wages of the industrious and the idle, of the ill-conducted and the well disposed; the conversion of wages from a matter of contract into a matter of right; the conversion of charity itself into a debt fiercely extorted and grudgingly paid only where it cannot be resisted, a source of discord and hatred instead of a bond of union; the destruction of industry, providence, and natural affection; the indefinite multiplication of a servile population; fires, riots and noon-day robbery: the dissolution, in short, of the bonds of civilized society, are the natural, and, if it be not abandoned in time, the inevitable consequences . . . Such a provision must increase population by diminishing the responsibility of marriage; it must diminish industry by making subsistence independent of exertion; and as the fund for the maintenance of labourers is the result of their industry, and in a great measure proportioned to it, the amount of that

Senior went on to argue further that the wages fund is the result of the workers' industry and is 'in great measure proportioned to it'. If effort is reduced so will be the wages fund while the number to be maintained by it grows. Senior maintained that the effects of the Old Poor Law in England had been bad enough but to introduce them to Ireland would be worse.³⁵ As Bowley argued, the Poor Law had been introduced in England to assist the poor affected by the accidents and contingencies of life, not to raise the general standard of living. However in Ireland the fundamental problem was the deep poverty of the labouring population and the introduction of the English system would have no impact on this while bringing with it a host of other difficulties.³⁶

Having said this Senior went on to outline a surprising series of proposals – the aim of which is the enlargement of the wages fund and the decrease in the number claimants; in other words to increase the productivity of Irish labour and decrease population. The specific measures were the building of roads, railways, harbours, docks and canals; the draining of bogs; and the reclamation of waste. The principal aim was not to provide employment directly but to increase the productive capacity of the country so that the workforce would be more productive, although, of course, employment would be created in the process. Senior also advocated emigration to reduce the size of the population so as to take pressure off the wages fund while it was being regenerated.

As Bowley notes, it is quite extraordinary that at the height of the power of private industry a leading economist is arguing that the government should direct the investment of capital and establish productive enterprises.³⁷ Senior was under no illusion that this would solve Ireland's problems quickly but the aim was to break the vicious circle of poverty. Fundamentally Senior was, unlike Malthus, an optimist who believed that continuous progress was possible.

4 Nassau Senior and the English The Poor Law

As I argued above there were two key problems with the English Poor Law, namely the continual increase in the burden of the poor rates due to the growth and scope of relief to the able-bodied, and the abuses in the system. Bowley has also pointed out that the problem was primarily one of the agricultural areas, and that before the Commission started its work, the major concern was over reducing the rates rather than the degraded pauper status of the labourer (2003, p.282). Senior's main contribution was in changing reform from a 'class-reform dictated by political necessity, to one of a large-scale social reform based on a philosophy of a free society'³⁸; and the key to this was to free the labourer from pauperism. Senior's letter on the Irish poor impressed Howick who

fund diminished while the number to be maintained by it is increased; and that fund must be still further diminished by the natural unwillingness to apply capital to land subject to so indefinite a charge.'

³⁵ Senior found himself in a minority when the Political Economy Club debated the question of introducing public relief in Ireland. Senior and the others who opposed the introduction did so on the basis of the particular conditions existing in Ireland and not on principle. How could paupers be made less eligible than Irish peasants even in workhouses? See Poynter (1969, pp.306-308).

³⁶ Bowley (1937 pp.246-7).

³⁷ Bowley, (1937 pp. 248-50).

³⁸ Bowley, (1937 p. 283).

conferred with the leaders of the Whig administration and it was agreed that something ought to be done about the Poor Law abuses in England. On the 19th January 1832, Senior's friend (and Secretary to the Board of Control) Hyde Villiers wrote to Howick suggesting the establishment of a Commission to investigate pauperism and make recommendations for reform. He recommended Senior as a 'practical Political Economist, who has written well on the subject'.³⁹ Lord Chancellor Brougham suggested that the Commission be divided into a Central Board and itinerant Assistant Commissioners who would collect facts and opinions.⁴⁰ The Central Board would digest the information collected and produce proposals based on the evidence. The Central Board also had to prepare the 'Instructions' for the Assistants and Senior was given this task. Levy argues that passages in the Instructions 'throw light on some of the leading principles in the final Report of the Poor Law Commissioners' (see Appendix 2, point 5).⁴¹ So much time was taken in preparing the questions and Instructions and in appointing the Assistants that few assistants began on their mission before the middle of August 1832.

Almost immediately Brougham demanded that the results of the enquiries should be sent to him piecemeal. Senior had the early results (some 600 replies) and took the opportunity of digesting these for Brougham and presenting his own proposals for reform based on these limited findings. The results were presented in his letter to Lord Brougham dated 14th September 1832 - barely a month after the majority of assistants had begun their work!⁴² In this letter Senior focused on four problems – the Allowance System which destroyed productivity; the diminution of the wages and rates 'fund'; corruption; and the question of bastardy.⁴³

His fundamental objection to the Poor Laws can be seen from this letter in which he argued against the practice which had developed of giving 'allowances' to the able-bodied working poor and traced through the consequences:

The present system gives the labourer low wages but at the same time easy work. It gives him also, strange as it may appear, what he values more, a sort of independence. He need not study to please his master, he need not bestir himself to seek work, he need not put any restraint on his temper, he need not ask relief as a favour, he need not fear that his idleness, or drunkenness, will injure his family; he has, in short, all a slave's security for subsistence without his liabilities to punishment (Levy, 1970, p.249).

³⁹ Bowley (1937, p. 286).

⁴⁰ Of the Assistants, almost half were friends of Senior. See Levy (1970, p83). One of the most important and energetic of these was Edwin Chadwick who has been seen as the champion of the Benthamite cause – see, for example, Brundage (1978, chapter 2) and Cowherd (1977, chapter 9). Finer takes a slightly different view – arguing that Chadwick did not take over Bentham's view on poor relief although he was much indebted to Bentham's *Panopticon*. See Finer (1952, pp43-44 footnote 2 and pp.72-81).

⁴¹ Levy, (1970 p.82). This statement is taken verbatim from the Poor law Commissioners Report of 1834, Part 1, S5.

⁴² Letter to Lord Chancellor Brougham on Poor Law Reform, 14 September 1832, Nassau Senior Collection, *National Library of Wales*, Aberystwyth, reproduced in Levy (1970, pp.247-262).

⁴³ Senior followed this up with another letter in January 1833 to Brougham developing arguments for and against bringing the Poor Law under national control.

The consequences of these Poor Law allowances for the workforce were to reduce their wages, morale and productivity, and Senior, later in the same letter, explained the consequences of falling productivity in 'fund' terms:⁴⁴

In the first place the fund for the payment both of wages and of rates is diminishing. That fund consists of commodities which must be periodically reproduced by the industry and skill of the labourers assisted by the farmer's capital. All the evidence now before us shows that, in the pauperized districts, skill and industry and capital are all wasting away. The fund would soon become unequal to the demands on it even if these demands were stationary. But they are increasing every day (Levy, 1970, p.249).

The reason why the demands on the funds were increasing was that people who should have known better, such as farmers, the clergy, and the magistrates, subscribed to the 'monstrous' doctrines that wages were a matter of right and not contract and that the amount for their payment and the payment of poor relief was inexhaustible. Extravagant rates of wages and allowances had been granted as a result.⁴⁵ Senior's fundamental objection to the Poor Laws was not that they were likely to *increase the rate of growth of population*, but that they were likely to *reduce the rate of growth of the wages fund* from which labour could be supported.

Senior also commented on the extent of abuse:

I was prepared for much abuse and for much mischief, both moral and physical, but did not expect to find it so widely diffused – so fatal for the welfare of all classes, or so difficult of cure or even of palliation (Levy, 1970, p.247).

Senior also criticised the approach to bastardy, arguing that a mother could receive more for a bastard child than a widow would receive for a legitimate child:

...even a single bastard is an incumbrance, and that two or three are a sort of fortune, and that she is scarcely ever punished by law, and never by public opinion, the wonder seems to be that any marriages take place (Levy, 1970, p253).

Senior went on to outline some remedies centred around reformed and well regulated workhouses where 'there would be general directions as to diet, degree of confinement, and labour, varied according to the circumstances of the inmates, so as to make the workhouse a place of comfort for the aged and infirm, and of discomfort for the able-bodied' (Levy, 1970, p.252). He argued for the repeal of the Gilbert Act of 1782 which

⁴⁴ Letter to Brougham on Poor Law Reform, Levy (1970, p.249). This is the basis of Levy's erroneous judgement that Senior's 'conception of a wages fund had no reference to a rigidly-fixed and unalterable amount as the Iron Law of wages would imply' (1970, p.328). Clearly Levy has misunderstood the point that this analysis is long run and of course in the long run the wages fund can change. See Vint (1994, pp.39-40). At the same time this reference to a 'fund' is not to the usual notion of a wages fund as it includes rates. A later example of this approach can be found in the writing by John Stuart Mill on minimum wages – see Vint (1994, pp163-164).

⁴⁵ This approach was supported by another member of the Commission - Henry Garler - who also wrote to Chancellor Brougham in support of Senior's argument: 'The labourers have been taught the doctrine that the first incumbrance upon property is their claim to relief, that the land [such is their expression] must support them, that whatever may be the source or cause of their wants, the law not only authorizes but directs the magistrates to supply their demands. These doctrines have not only been countenanced by newspapers and by some periodical writers but have received the avowed sanction of those who interpret and administer the Poor Laws, both by their expressions and their practices.' Letter from Henry Garler to Lord Chancellor Brougham, 1 November 1832, *Nassau Senior Collection*, National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth.

forebade the placing of the able-bodied in workhouses. Allowances would be abolished and in future anyone seeking relief would have to enter the workhouse. He also recommended changes to the law relating to bastardy.

The main point of the reforms eventually outlined in the 1834 Report was to reduce claims for relief from the able-bodied and this was to be achieved by making the system a harsh one. Central to this were the principle of 'less eligibility' and the workhouse test. Less eligibility meant that the situation of able-bodied pauper 'on the whole shall not be made really or apparently so eligible as the situation of the independent labourer of the lowest class'.⁴⁶ This could be enforced by making the able-bodied and their families go into a workhouse as a 'test' of their destitution. Conditions there would involve strict discipline, hard work, monotonous food, and the separation of families. 'Less eligibility' was to rest on discipline and not material conditions. It was not intended that inmates of the workhouses would be receive treatment worse than that of the poorest independent labourers; neither was it intended that workhouse conditions would be untenable.⁴⁷ Having said that, it was envisaged that workers would do almost anything to avoid going in. There were a number of other measures designed to improve administration and reduce corruption.

As with his report on Ireland (in his letter to Howick), Senior showed that he was not against Poor Relief in principle but he was opposed to the current arrangements. He supported relief for orphans, the blind and the disabled, including medical treatment and hospitals although he opposed relief for the elderly.

Levy (1970, pp.83-84) produced a table of correspondence in which he compared passages in Senior's letter of September 1832 with passages in the Commissioners Report of 1834 arguing that many portions of the Report were taken 'word for word' from the letter.⁴⁸ Thus this letter of 1832, written when only a small sample of the evidence had been sent in, may be seen as a blueprint for the Final Report two years later. It seems, as Routh has argued, that Senior's mind may have been made up even before the investigation began (1975, p.153).

As we shall see in the next section, it is clear that Harriet Martineau knew of Senior's letters – the one to Howick and the two to Brougham; that she met with him during this

⁴⁶ Poor Law Commissioners Report (1834, p.228)

⁴⁷ 'All labour is irksome to those who are unaccustomed to labour; and what is generally meant by the expression 'rendering the pauper's situation irksome', is rendering it laborious. But it is not by means of labour alone that the principle is applicable, nor does it imply that the food or comforts of the pauper should approach the lowest point at which existence may be maintained. Although the workhouse food be more ample in quantity and better in quality than that of which the labourer's family partakes, and the house in other respects superior to the cottage, yet the strict discipline of well-regulated workhouses, and in particular the restrictions to which the inmates are subject in respect to the use of acknowledged luxuries, such as fermented liquors and tobacco, are intolerable to the indolent and disorderly, while to the aged, the feeble, and other proper objects of relief, the regularity and discipline render the workhouse a place of comparative comfort'. Passage quoted is from *The Poor Law Report of 1834, Remedial Measures: Principle of Administering Relief to the Indigent*, Online Library of Liberty, pp.230-231.

⁴⁸ Levy points to seventeen passages where portions of the Final Report were based on Senior's 1832 letter. In fact only some parts of these passages are 'word for word' as Levy suggests, although all relate back to Senior's letter in some way.

period to discuss the Poor Laws; and that she based many of her arguments in her *Tales* on Senior's views in these documents.

5 Harriet Martineau and the Poor Law in the *Illustrations of Political Economy*

Harriet Martineau wrote six Tales in which the Poor Law was the main focus. Two of them – *Cousin Marshall* and *Ireland* - were respectively tales numbers eight and nine in Volume Three of the *Illustrations of Political Economy*. The other four made up the *Poor Laws and Paupers Illustrated* series which she was asked to write by Lord Brougham in order to aid the Poor Law Commission. Martineau says in her Autobiography⁴⁹ that *Cousin Marshall* was already written and at press when Brougham approached her for the new series, and that she got her 'material as to details, from a brother who was a Guardian, and from a lady who took an interest in workhouse management'.⁵⁰

Her interest in political economy was inspired by the reading she did in order to review Thomas Cooper's *Lectures on Political Economy* (1831), and she determined to remedy her lack of knowledge of political economy by further study. Her subsequent reading included Smith, Malthus, Ricardo, McCulloch among others and the structure of the *Illustrations* were based on James Mill's *Elements*. Underlying these economic ideas was an overriding set of convictions from her Unitarian background. Principal amongst these, as Hoecker-Drysdale has put it, was the belief in necessarianism 'which recognised both the influence of natural laws on human existence but, at the same time, the moral responsibility and agency of each individual' (2003, pp185-186).⁵¹ As Martineau wrote in her Autobiography 'the workings of the universe are governed by laws which cannot be broken by human will...no action fails to produce effects, and no efforts can be lost. I have no doubt...that true Necessarians must be the most diligent and confident of all workers' (1877, I: pp85-86).⁵² The tales themselves featured characters who were factory workers, merchants, middle class bankers and as Peterson has argued indicates 'Martineau's conception ...turning away from the historical novel and the hero of high birth and turning instead to ordinary heroes in everyday life' (2009, pp.87-90).

Cousin Marshall

This tale has a number of plots in it but the main story is of a family whose house burns down. The mother dies and the four children have to be split up with two lodging with a cousin – cousin Marshall – and the other two having to go in to the workhouse. Much of the tale focuses on the children especially those in the workhouse and attention is paid to conditions of workhouse life. As with earlier tales Martineau has a particular character – in this case a surgeon named Mr Burke – who discusses with others the economics and social issues involved. In discussion with his unmarried sister Louisa with whom he lives Burke complains about the number of the indigent, and how this number should be reduced. He argued that efforts must be made to increase the wages fund and

⁴⁹ Martineau (2010, vol.1, p.218).

⁵⁰ Martineau (2010, vol.1, p.218.)

⁵¹ On Necessarianism see Freedgood (2000, pp.28-29); Webb (1960, pp.78-88)

⁵² Quoted in Hoecker-Drysdale (2003, p103).

proportioning the number of labourers to it. In order to increase the wages fund it is important that the usual means of increasing capital be actively plied' He also goes on to say that 'the immense amount which is now consumed by the indigent should be applied to the purposes of production'.⁵³ Later in the conversation Burke makes it clear that the 'usual means' implies private investment; in other words the state cannot 'increase at its will, the subsistence fund'.⁵⁴

When asked by his sister would he do away with all charity he replied that he would keep supporting education, those who were deaf and dumb but, except in certain cases of extreme difficulty, he would be against alms houses for the elderly. Although she does not say it in the *Autobiography* this whole line of reasoning would appear to come from Senior's letter to Howick on Ireland discussed above. What she does say in the *Autobiography*, however, is something quite telling. In a section on morning visitors in the years 1832-34, she says that 'Mr Senior used to come and talk about the poor-law, or Ireland'!⁵⁵

Of course Senior said nothing about the English Poor Law in the letter to Howick other than to say it should not be applied in Ireland. Thus there was no argument from Senior for Harriet to follow with regard to reform. Instead, later in the story when Mr Burke is discussing with someone else about getting the rate down Harriet gets the character to repeat more or less word for word the abolitionist line of Malthus's Great Quarto of 1803:

The best plan, in my opinion, yet proposed, is this :-- to enact that no child born from and marriage taking place within a year from the date of the law, and no illegitimate child born within two years from the same date, shall ever be entitled to parish assistance.⁵⁶

Harriet obviously went back to Malthus for inspiration on this aspect. In her Summary of Principles for this story (separately provided as usual at the end) she is even more explicitly abolitionist:

What, then, must be done to lessen the number of the indigent, now so frightfully increasing The subsistence-fund must be employed productively, and capital and labour be allowed to take their natural course; *i.e.* the pauper system must, by some means or other, be extinguished.⁵⁷

It could not be clearer.

One other theme in the tale is that of life in the workhouse and under the system of relief generally. One of the children, Jane, also goes into the workhouse and is affected by the behavior of the other paupers. She eventually leaves the workhouse but is made pregnant by a pauper she meets in her work on a farm. Although she tries to conceal her situation, the truth is soon discovered and when questioned by her cousin Marshall, Jane blamed the workhouse:

Jane would not let it drop. She laid much of the blame on the workhouse, where it was a common boast among the women how early they had got married, being so far better off than honest people

⁵³ *Cousin Marshall* (1832a, p.40).

⁵⁴ *Cousin Marshall* (1832a, p.45).

⁵⁵ Martineau (2010, vol.1 p.415)

⁵⁶ *Cousin Marshall* (1832a, p.119).

⁵⁷ *Cousin Marshall* (1832a, p.131).

that they need not trouble themselves about what became of themselves and their children, since the parish was bound to find them. It was considered a kind of enterprise among the paupers to cheat their superiors, and to get the girl early married by rendering marriage desirable on the score of decency, and of the chance of the man being able to support his children hereafter.⁵⁸

Jane's intended husband was never found and she is forced to return to the workhouse. As we have seen the question of unmarried mothers (and bastardy) was important in the discussions relating to the Poor law. This telling of the realities of the life we will return to later.⁵⁹

Ireland

The tale on Ireland is not directly relevant to the question of the English Poor Laws but it is worth looking at the arguments Martineau puts in to her Summary of Principles at the end of the story.

While capital has been growing much more slowly than it ought, population has been increasing much more rapidly than the circumstances of the country have warranted: the consequences of which are, extensive and appalling indigence, and a wide spread of the moral evils which attend it.

An immediate palliation of this indigence would be the result of introducing a legal pauper-system into Ireland; but it would be at the expense of an incalculable permanent increase of the evil.

It is hard to believe that this is not taken from Senior's letter to Howick. Martineau goes on to recommend the usual remedies of reducing population, encouraging emigration and increased education.

In both these tales *Cousin Marshall* and *Ireland* Martineau is taking Senior and Malthus as her sources. Senior sets out the proper scope for intervention in cases of accidents, disability etc and Malthus is turned to for arguments on abolition of relief for others i.e. the able-bodied.

6 Harriet Martineau and the Poor Law in *Poor Laws and Paupers Illustrated*

The four poor law *Tales* were *The Parish*, *The Hamlets*, *The Town* and *The Land's End* and they were published with a heading which proclaimed that they were *Under the Superintendence of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge*.⁶⁰ The Society had been established by Brougham and others as part of an attempt to educate the working classes in political economy.⁶¹ Brougham invited Harriet Martineau to write some stories in aid of the work of the Commission on the Poor Law promising her payment and access to the evidence being collected by the Assistant Commissioners. Brougham was very keen to get Martineau involved with the 'Diffusion Society' as he was very annoyed that

⁵⁸ *Cousin Marshall* (1832a, p.96)

⁵⁹ Brundage (2002, pp. 68-9) argues that negative feelings towards unmarried mothers had been increasing for some years and that Martineau's tale *Cousin Marshall* added to public concern over immorality in the workhouse.

⁶⁰ See R K Webb *The British Working Class Reader 1790-1848* (1955); especially pages 66-73, 85-93 and 114-127.

⁶¹ Brougham, along with others, set up the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge in 1826 with the expressed aim of imparting 'useful knowledge' by means of regular publications made available to reading societies and Mechanics' Institutes. The ground to be covered was to be natural philosophy, ethics, political philosophy, history, and biography. While Brougham's initial vision seems to have included politics as part of the subject matter to be disseminated by the society, in fact the Society's publications such as the *Penny Magazine* avoided political issues, and politics and even newspapers were excluded from Mechanics' Institutes.

the Society had turned down the opportunity to publish the *Illustrations*.⁶² Martineau was busy enough and could do without further work, and there was no need of the money, but she agreed because she believed in the cause.⁶³

Each of the four tales in the series contributes something different to the understanding of the poor law issue. The first and the longest, *The Parish*, brings out many of the abuses and difficulties with the Poor Laws as presented in the final Report of the Commission. *The Hamlets* is a futuristic tale in which the reforms are in the process of being introduced. *The Town* focuses on some of the administrative elements of the reform programme – relating to the questions of the make-up of vestries and so on. The final tale *The Land's End* concerns the question of parishes cooperating by forming unions – another plank of the reforms designed to spread risk when some parishes are flourishing and others not. In this paper I will focus on the first two tales which deal with the key economic matter and will attempt to bring out the salient points as they relate to Harriet Martineau's economic ideas. Before turning to the tales it is worth considering Martineau's *Preface* to the series.

The Preface

In the first paragraph she says the following:

As any utility which may be contemplated from the following tale must be impaired by the supposition that the woes and vices it displays are the offspring of an uncontrolled imagination, I beg to state that all that is most melancholy in my story is strictly true. I have unquestionable authority in the Reports of the Poor-Law Commissioners, and the testimony of others who are occupied in the administration of parish affairs, for every parochial abuse and every pauper encroachment here exhibited; and I have taken no pains to select the worst instances of either that have come within my knowledge.

This is very interesting for a number of reasons. First the reference to 'uncontrolled imagination' probably refers to some irritation Martineau experienced with the reaction to the immorality (the pregnancy of unmarried Jane for example – see above p.19) depicted in *Cousin Marshall*.⁶⁴ So there's an element of 'I told you so' about it – now she had the evidence from the Reports to support her. Secondly, there is a sense in which she is saying that the stories will be *based on evidence* as compared with the *Illustrations* which were based on economic principles first and foremost. Thirdly and significantly, there are no Summaries at the end of the tales pointing out the Principles under

⁶² Martineau had sent one of the tales (a draft of what became *Brooke and Brooke Farm*) to the Diffusion Society. Charles Knight, the publisher of the Society, sent her a note of encouragement but a sub-committee thought the manuscript to be dull and sent it back. Martineau later reported in her autobiography that Brougham had made mockery of their decision' and that he was known to say that 'he should revive the torture for their sakes, as hanging was too good for them' She went on – 'He tore his hair over the tales, he added, unable to endure that the whole Society, "instituted for the very purpose, should be driven out of the field by a little deaf woman at Norwich"' (2010, pp.175-176).

⁶³ See the *Autobiography* (2010, pp218-220). Brougham proposed that she should be paid £100 per story - £75 from the Diffusion Society and £25 from himself. In the event Harriet claims that although she received the money from the Diffusion Society, the money from Brougham was never paid – a matter dealt with rather acidically in the *Autobiography* (pp220-221).

⁶⁴ See the *Autobiography* (2010, pp.203-4).

discussion. This reinforces the notion that the task is different. Martineau is no longer setting out to lay out a set of principles turned into tales but is now acting as a commissioned agent of Brougham who together with Senior's help, advice and material, is seeking to do a specific job – that of publicising, advocating and justifying the reforms. She then goes on to say:

The pleasantest office of philanthropy is, doubtless, to set forth persuasively whatever is pure in human nature, and lofty in social character; but there is a satisfaction amidst the pain of exhibiting the reverse of the picture, when vice and misery can be indisputably referred to the errors of a system rather than to the depravity of individuals. All social systems being remediable, the task of exposing the unhappy results of any involves a definite hope of the amelioration which must, sooner or later, follow the exposure. The more clearly evils can be referred to an institution, the more cheering are the expectations of what may be effected by its amendment. Let these rational hopes console the readers as they have supported the writer of this tale.

This is philosophically a very important passage. In the *Illustrations* Martineau was keen to show that individuals or groups of individuals (strikers, say) were at fault in not recognising or in resisting the working of the market and the laws of political economy. Here she says the reverse although in a consistent fashion. It's the system which has 'errors' not individuals⁶⁵ but the system now of course consists of the institutions of the Poor Law which interfere with the market. However as we shall see Harriet Martineau, following Senior, is not now an abolitionist. As Elaine Freedgood has argued, Martineau like other liberals of the period had become increasingly aware of the risks inherent in unregulated markets. In the labour market this could lead to unemployment, poverty, and unrest. The risks had to be taken on board and dealt with by government agencies. Indeed a note of optimism radiates from the paragraph seemingly on the grounds that institutions can be changed more effectively than individuals.⁶⁶

The Parish

The first tale *The Parish* is 216 pages long – longer than any tale in the *Illustrations* by 40 or 50 pages. This tale represents Harriet's first and most comprehensive reaction to the material she was getting from Brougham and Senior and a sense of excitement and industry seems to radiate from this piece. Harriet enjoys portraying a panoply of rogues and rascals who have played their parts in the abuse of the system of poor relief. Those with responsibilities for administering relief are: Manning the squire and magistrate who is weak; Goldby the farmer also weak; Donkin the overseer who obeys orders, reports issues and tries to enforce the rules; and Woollerton the vestry clerk who is corrupt. There is a wealth of material in Martineau's tale and it does reflect what is in the Poor Law Commission Report although she developed it from the samples sent to her by Brougham – *The Parish* and *The Hamlets* were published in 1833 before the 1834 Report appeared.

A key aspect of the Poor Law problem was that the system encouraged farmers to employ men who are paupers. They can be paid lower wages as the rest is made up from the

⁶⁵ Her vision of the individual was of 'the independent, self-sufficient working-man, able to contract for his own terms of labour, sober, industrious and prudent' – see Webb (1960, p.349).

⁶⁶ See Freedgood (2000, pp.38-39).

parish. If they do not employ paupers they still have to pay through the rates for the paupers anyway. This produces (at least) two main effects. First, the guarantee of parish pay makes the men indifferent to whether they work hard or not. In *The Parish* Harriet Martineau makes numerous references to the idleness of parish supported workers. This picks up on the 1832 letter to Brougham, and the 1834 Poor Law Report is full of such comments as well (see Appendix 2, item 1).

Secondly, if workers happen to have savings, or a pension or even livestock they will not be entitled to Poor Relief. In *The Parish* there is the case of Ashly who comes to farmer Goldby seeking work. Ashly says that he knows the farmer's carter Sewell is retiring having received a legacy and asks if he could take his place. He explained that he was sacked from Mr Bingham's farm to make way for Tims who was a pauper and although he, Ashly, had savings they would soon be gone. The farmer says it may be better for you if you had no savings. Goldby must employ Wilde, a pauper employed by the parish, in the gravel pits because he cannot remain a burden on the parish when the farmer can give him work. In addition Wilde can be paid lower wages because he is a single man. The parish pays for children of the indigent but even though Ashly has six motherless children he is not entitled to relief because of his savings. In the Report there are a number of examples of this (see Appendix 2, items 2-4).

Martineau also makes much of corruption in the tale. Thus the Vestry Clerk Woollerton who had power to recommend relief or not also owned a shop where prices were high and it was made clear by his wife that if complaints about high prices were heard she would hint that 'without her husband's good-nature in the vestry, they might have been in no condition to make purchases at all' (*The Parish* pp.17-18). On the death of Woollerton those in the workhouse were concerned for the future as to 'whether they had in the vestry-clerk a friend who was in their interest, in return for patronage of his shop, or a man who would retrench all needless indulgences' (*The Parish*, pp171-2). In another part of the tale the overseer Donkin observes that the shoes handed out in the workhouse were very dear and that he had pointed this out many times. But he went on to say the shoemaker was a friend of Woollerton and that the workhouse, on some pretext, was compelled to take a certain quantity of shoes every year and sometimes this was more than was required. The shoes were given to the paupers who bartered them for other goods. Later in the tale a woman in the workhouse remarks of Woollerton's wife:

Mrs. Woollerton has no objection to changing away, when one has no money; she has taken two pairs of shoes off me very lately. Her gin is as good as you can get, though she does not profess to sell it. (1833a, p.171).

These incidents in *The Parish* reflect a number of references to similar kinds of corruption in the Commission's Report.

The Hamlets

This is a futuristic tale of transition from the Old Poor Law to the New. The key to the story is the arrival at the hamlet of Hurst of a Mr Barry who is appalled by the idleness and disorder he finds there together with the heavy poor rate. He volunteers reluctantly to become the overseer and begins to implement change. The old workhouse in Hurst is

designated for the able-bodied and is made more grim by the addition of higher walls and restrictions on coming and going. The old, the sick and the children are removed to a nearby village (which has joined in a union) where a separate workhouse is established with better conditions. Mr Barry refuses all outdoor relief and insists on the ‘workhouse test’ for the able-bodied. Some opt to go in to the workhouse under the misguided impression that things will be as they used to be. However what they find is a shocking new regime of hard work, no beer, no tobacco, the doors only open once a day, and the separation of men and women. In the story this forces a rapid change of behavior and men leave the workhouse to get jobs rather than suffer its harsh conditions. At the end of the story Mr Barry is content with the results of his efforts:

There is now every hope – there can be no doubt – that many hundred pounds will be saved from the profitless maintenance of paupers, to be laid out in rewarding labour; that is in enabling the farmer and shopkeeper to lay out their own money in their own way, for the benefit of themselves and society; in enabling the labourer to support his household with a spirit unhardened and ungrieved; in enabling the pauper to make the comparison between freedom with toil on the one hand, and restraint with more irksome toil on the other. The rate has fallen one-third already, and is still falling; and Rickman and Dove are paying their men fourteen shillings a week, instead of nine, as at this time last year.⁶⁷

The Hamlets was a highly optimistic piece of fiction – the appointment of the new overseer results in immediate change. Martineau has moved a long way from the abolitionism of Malthus – radical reform is now the way forward and success is guaranteed.⁶⁸ In fact the pace of change was rather slow and quite patchy across the country.

7 Concluding Comments

A great deal happened in the five years from 1829 to 1834. Senior’s rejection of Malthus’s (supply side) population approach set the scene for an analysis of policy issues (the Irish poor and the English Poor Law) which were essentially from the demand side – focusing on the need for the wages fund to be protected from being wasted away in supporting the able-bodied poor and improving the productivity of labour in general. Harriet Martineau followed Senior throughout this period. Starting as a Malthusian emphasising the supply side and the need for the abolition of the Poor Laws in *Cousin Marshall*, she also took Senior’s position on the case for the sick and old in *Ireland*. In the *Poor Laws and Paupers Illustrated* she worked hand in hand with Senior and Brougham to produce stories which outlined and supported in 1833/4 the programme of reform before the Poor Law Report was published in 1834.

How enlightening it would be to have some record of those morning conversations between Harriet Martineau and Nassau Senior recorded in her *Autobiography*. In their absence, it is of course possible to think that Harriet influenced Senior in some way, rather than the other way round, but it is very unlikely. The analysis in the paper shows that in *Cousin Marshall* and *Ireland* she followed Senior and Malthus. In the ‘Pauper’

⁶⁷ Elsewhere in the *The Hamlets* Martineau says that the expense of the two workhouses had been £200 during the year, compared with between £1200 and £1300 before Mr Barry had taken over.

⁶⁸ See Huzel (2006, pp.55-98) for a discussion of Martineau as the ‘female Malthusian’.

tales she adopted the same ‘evidence-based’ approach found in Senior’s letter to Brougham, reflecting the early reports of the Assistants.⁶⁹ In the latter case it was only to be expected – she was commissioned to write the tales on the basis that she would be supplied with the evidence. But what she also made use of was Senior’s interpretation of the evidence and his recommendations to Brougham. Where I believe that she was being disingenuous was her claim in the *Autobiography* that when she was asked to provide some conclusions and suggestions:

I did so, on the form of a programme of doctrine which exposes the evils of the old system, while others pourtray the features of its proposed successor. My document actually crossed in the street one sent me by a member of the government detailing the heads of the new Bill. I sat down to read it with no little emotion, and some apprehension; and the moment when, arriving at the end, I found that the government scheme and my own were identical point by point, was not one to be easily forgotten (2010, pp.221-222).

This would have *indeed* been a coincidence, if it were a coincidence - but I do not believe that it was. Her scheme was based on Senior’s Letter to Brougham which was itself the embryo of the government’s bill.

In the meeting of minds on Poor Law reform there appears to have been a timely coincidence of intellectual objectives and ambitions. Senior, the most influential of Classical economists of the day, was bent on reform. Harriet Martineau was at the height of her popularity and keen to write critically on the Poor Laws. Lord Brougham, also at the height of his powers, irritated by his failure to capture Martineau’s talents earlier and determined now to do so, brought the economist and populariser together to set the scene – each in their own way – for the legislation to follow.

The history of the aftermath of the 1834 reform is as complex as the history which preceded it, leading up eventually to the Beveridge legislation in the 1940s. Understandably life in the workhouse was as harsh as it was intended to be, and hatred of the workhouse and the means (income) test was a powerful force for the reforms of the Beveridge approach. Having said that and as Fraser argues, during its lifetime it seems to have worked in reducing the numbers of able-bodied receiving relief; and rates were held down.⁷⁰

It would be satisfying to claim that the events touched on in the paper between 1829 and 1834 were ‘five years that changed England’ but one could say that about almost any five year period (certainly the two world wars). However, these years not only brought radical parliamentary reform but also Poor Law reform which *did* change social policy for over a century and some of the issues being discussed then continue to be discussed now.

⁶⁹ It may well be the case that Brougham’s insistence on obtaining the reports as soon as possible was due, at least in part, to his determination to set Martineau up with some evidence on which to begin her Poor Law tales.

⁷⁰ In 1831 expenditure on poor relief was over £7 million and it fell to £4-5 million in the years immediately after reform, and settled at between £5-6 million throughout the rest of the century, despite rising population. The number on relief fell, and the overall proportion of paupers to population fell from 6% at mid-century to 2.5% by the end of the century. See Fraser (2009, pp.46-69).

APPENDIX 1

1 The fear of losing decencies, or perhaps more frequently the hope to acquire, by a longer accumulation during celibacy the means of purchasing the decencies of a higher social rank, is a check of far more importance. Want of actual necessities is seldom apprehended by any except the poorest classes in any country. And in England, though it sometimes is felt, it probably is anticipated by none..When an Englishman stands hesitating between love and prudence, a family really starving is not among his terrors. Against actual want he knows that he has the fence of the poor laws. But, however humble his desires, he cannot contemplate, without anxiety, a probability that the income which supported his social rank while single, may be insufficient to maintain it when he is married; that he may be unable to give to his children the advantages of education which he enjoyed himself; in short, that he may lose his caste. Men of more enterprise are induced to postpone marriage, not merely by the fear of sinking, but also by the hope, that in an unencumbered state they may rise. As they mount, the horizon of their ambition keeps receding, until sometimes the time has passed away for realizing those plans of domestic happiness which probably every man has formed in his youth (1829, II pp26-27)

2 'But I must admit that this is not the received opinion. The popular doctrine certainly is that population has a tendency to increase beyond the means of subsistence, or, in other words, that, whatever be the means of subsistence, population has a tendency fully to come up to them, and even to struggle to pass beyond them, and is kept back principally by the vice and misery which that struggle occasions. I admit that population has the power (considered abstractedly) so to increase, and I admit that, under the influence of unwise institutions, that power may be exercised, and the amount of subsistence bear a smaller proportion than before to the number of people; and that vice and misery, more or less intense and diffused, according to the circumstances of each case, must be the result. What I deny is, that, under wise institutions, there is any tendency to this state of things. I believe the tendency to be just the reverse' (1829, II pp.35-36).

3 Is this improvement in the circumstances of the lower ranks of the people to be regarded as an advantage or as an inconveniency to the society? The answer seems at first sight abundantly plain. Servants, labourers and workmen of different kinds, make up the far greater part of every great political society. But what improves the circumstances of the greater part can never be regarded as an inconveniency to the whole. No society can surely be flourishing and happy, of which the far greater part of the members are poor and miserable. It is but equity, besides, that they who feed, cloath and lodge the whole body of the people, should have such a share of the produce of their own labour as to be themselves tolerably well fed, cloathed and lodged. (1981, p.96)

4 The liberal reward of labour, as it encourages the propagation, so it increases the industry of the common people. The wages of labour are the encouragement of industry, which, like every other human quality, improves in proportion to the encouragement it receives. A plentiful subsistence increases the bodily strength of the labourer, and the comfortable hope of bettering his condition, and of ending his days perhaps in ease and plenty, animates him to exert that strength to the utmost. Where wages are high, accordingly, we shall always find the workmen more active, diligent, and expeditious, than where they are low;...(1981, p.99).

APPENDIX 2

- 1 One of the questions circulated by us in the rural districts was, whether the labourers in the respondent's neighbourhood were supposed to be better or worse workmen than formerly? If the answers to this question had been uniformly unfavourable, they might have been ascribed to the general tendency to depreciate what is present; but it will be found, on referring to our Appendix, that the replies vary according to the poor-law administration of the district. Where it is good, the replies are, "much the same," "never were better," "diligence the same, skill increased." But when we come within the influence of the allowance and the scale, the replies are, "they are much degenerated, being generally disaffected to their employers: they work unwillingly and wastefully:"¹⁷ "three of them would not do near the work in a day performed by two in more northern counties:"¹⁸ "one-third of our labourers do not work at all, the greater part of the remainder are much contaminated; the rising population learn nothing, the others are forgetting what they knew."¹⁹ "They are constantly changing their services. Relying upon parish support, they are indifferent whether they oblige or disobey their masters, are less honest and industrious, and the mutual regard between employer and servant is gone." "The system of allowance is most mischievous and ruinous, and, till it is abandoned, the spirit of industry can never be revived. Allowance-men will not work. It makes them idle, lazy, fraudulent, and worthless, and depresses the wages of free labour."²⁰ "With very few exceptions, the labourers are not as industrious as formerly; and notwithstanding the low rate of wages now too generally paid, it costs as much money in the end to have work performed as it did sixteen years ago."²¹ "The Poor Laws are perhaps better administered in this parish than in many others; but such a resource in view as parish relief prevents the labourer's exertions, and the young men from laying by anything in their youth. The latter marry early, because they can get no relief unless they have children; this, of course, raises the rates. An instance occurred a short time since, of a labourer marrying, and going from the church to the poor-house, not having money to pay the fees! By old experienced individuals it is supposed one labourer, forty years ago, would do more than two of the present day."²²

Poor Law Commissioners Report 1834, pp. 68-9. References are to Appendices to the Report

^[17.][17] App. (B. 1.) Quest. 37, Blunham, Beds, page 2 *c.*

^[18.][18] App. (B. 1.) Quest. 37, Pershore Division, Worcester, p. 588 *c.*

^[19.][19] App. (B. 1.) Quest. 37, Lenham, Kent, p. 252 *c.*

^[20.][20] App. (B. 1.) Quest. 40, Stiffkey, Norfolk, p. 324 *d.*

^[21.][21] App. (B. 1.) Quest. 37, Summertown, Oxford, p. 380 *c.*

^[22.][22] App. (B. 1.) Quest. 36 and 37, Millford, Southants, p. 424 *c.*

2 Sir Harry Verney, in a communication which will be found in App. (C.) says,—

"In the hundred of Buckingham, in which I act as a magistrate, many instances occur in which labourers are unable to obtain employment, because they have property of their own. For instance, in the parish of Steeple Claydon, John Lines, formerly a soldier, a very good workman, is refused employment, because he receives a pension. The farmers say that they cannot afford to employ those for whom they are not bound by law to provide. In order to prevent John Lines from being out of work, I am frequently obliged myself to give him employment."

3 .Mr. Chadwick thus reports the evidence of Mr. Hickson, a manufacturer at Northampton and landholder in Kent:—

"The case of a man who has worked for me will show the effect of the parish system in preventing frugal habits. This is a hard-working, industrious man, named William Williams. He is married, and had saved some money, to the amount of about 70*l.*, and had two cows; he had also a sow and ten pigs. He had got a cottage well furnished; he was a member of a benefit club at Meopham, from which he received 8*s.* a week when he was ill. He was beginning to learn to read and write, and sent his children to the Sunday-school. He had a legacy of about 46*l.*, but he got his other money together by saving from his fair wages as a waggoner. Some circumstances occurred which obliged me to part with him. The consequence of this labouring man having been frugal and saved money, and got the cows, was, that no one would employ him, although his superior character as a workman was well known in the parish.

4 We have already quoted from Mr. Cowell's Report a letter from Mr. Nash, of Royston, in which he states that he had been forced by the overseer of Reed to dismiss two excellent labourers, for the purpose of introducing two paupers into their place.

Mr. Nash adds, that of the men dismissed, one "Was John Walford, a parishioner of Barley, a steady, industrious, trustworthy, single man, who, by long and rigid economy, had saved about 100*l.* On being dismissed, Walford applied in vain to the farmers of Barley for employment. *'It was well known that he had saved money, and could not come on the parish, although any of them would willingly have taken him had it been otherwise.'* After living a few months without been able to get any work, he bought a cart and two horses, and has ever since obtained a precarious subsistence, by carrying corn to London for one of the Cambridge merchants; but just now the current of corn is northward, and he has nothing to do; and at any time he would gladly have exchanged his employment for that of day labour, if he could have obtained work. No reflection is intended on the overseers of Barley; they only do what all others are expected to do; though the young men point at Walford, and call him a fool, for not spending his money at the public-house, as they do; adding, that then he would get work."[39](#)

5

He [the Assistant Commissioner] will endeavour to ascertain whether any means are adopted to prevent residence in the [work] house from being an object of desire or indifference to the able-bodied poor, either by forced employment, restriction on leaving it, separation of the sexes, prohibition of fermented liquors and tobacco, or by any other expedients . . . He will enquire . . . whether there is any and what class of persons who actually oppose, or may be expected to oppose, their introduction or enforcement . . . He will enquire . . . whether the rate-payers are acquainted with the conditions under which parishes can now unite to form workhouses, or would be likely to avail themselves of any additional facilities that might be given for forming united workhouses . . . He will collect facts and opinions as to the practicability and expediency of an enactment prohibiting, with any and what expectations, relief to the able-bodied out of the workhouse . . . And he will compare the amount of work done, or of money received, by persons so employed by the parish, with the work which would have been exacted from the same persons, and the wages which would have been paid to them, if they had been employed by individuals . . . He will collect facts and opinions as to the practicability and expediency of exonerating the magistrates . . . from their jurisdiction with respect to relief . . . and as to the practicability and expediency of appointing and paying persons having, for their special purpose, magisterial responsibility, subject to strict superintendence . . . And he will endeavour to collect facts and opinions as to the average quantity of land which a labourer can beneficially occupy . . . and as to the expediency of any enactments either to facilitate the practice, or to guard against the danger of its creating a cottier population resembling that of Ireland.

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