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On Lord Palmerston and the Irish Famine Emigration

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ON LORD PALMERSTON AND THE IRISH FAMINE EMIGRATION

Desmond Norton

This communication refers to a contribution by Tyler Anbinder, entitled as above, published in *The Historical Journal*, 44, 2 (2001), pp. 441-469. It also refers to the related typescript of a book upon which I have been working since 1994, now virtually completed. Entitled *Landlords, tenants, famine: business of an Irish land agency in the 1840s*, the typescript is based on what I call the Stewart and Kincaid correspondence, complemented by other sources including the papers of the third Viscount Palmerston at the University of Southampton.

The firm of Stewart and Kincaid was Ireland's leading land agency during the 1840s. After it ceased operations in the 1980s, I acquired almost all of its correspondence archive of the 1840s. This consists of about 30,000 letters which had not been read since then. They form the core of *Landlords, tenants, famine*, chapter 2 of which is on management of Palmerston's estates in Sligo in the northwest of Ireland, while chapter 3 focuses on the famine on, and emigration from, those lands.

Anbinder states that few are aware that Palmerston was one of the first Irish landlords to finance the emigration of starving peasants during the great Irish famine, which commenced following failure of the potato crop in 1845 and lasted about four years. That Palmerston financed major emigration in 1847 is known to many historians¹.

Anbinder provides a useful collation of what is already in print² on the ships which sailed from

Sligo with Palmerston's emigrants in 1847. Unfortunately, Anbinder's contribution contains several errors. There is also a problem of relevant omissions. The following observations on Anbinder's work are appropriate.

Anbinder *knows* that it is wrong to state, as he does, that no detailed account of either Palmerston's Irish estate during the famine or of his emigration scheme has ever been written. In 1998 I sent him drafts of the above-mentioned chapters 2 and 3 upon which he heavily draws³. Unless otherwise indicated, those chapters and my draft chapter 1, along with references cited therein, constitute the sources for what follows.

At an early stage, Anbinder describes Palmerston's Ahamlish estate in north Sligo before the famine. Note his statement that visitors described Ahamlish as naked and unadorned. The latter description, not known to be that of visitors, is that of Samuel Lewis in 1837. It is highly improbable that he ever visited Ahamlish⁴. But Anbinder's inaccuracy on this point is less important than some of what he omits about pre-famine Ahamlish. In his review of living standards there, he ignores the amazing improvements implemented by Palmerston between 1837 and 1845. In the context of Palmerston's support for emigration, the most important of these was the squaring of the land (rationalisation in the structure of holdings).

In the early 19th century, Palmerston's Ahamlish tenantry rented plots from middlemen who held the land under lease and set it out in rundale, a system of communal occupation under which a tenant might from time to time hold many tiny detached plots. This was inefficient. When some of the leases expired circa 1837, Palmerston began to abolish the system of middlemen and rundale. Each tenant was now to have his own square. Squaring was

continued throughout the 1840s. Creation of holdings which were minimally viable meant that small tenants had to go, and before the famine Palmerston assisted some of them to emigrate; however, an impression which emerges from Anbinder is that assisted emigration from Ahamlish both commenced and ended in 1847. Note also that Palmeston s estates to the south of Sligo town (not discussed by Anbinder) were also squared, mainly in the late 1840s. Squaring and assisted emigration were related.

Anbinder errs on the identities of some people. First, it is misleading to state that Stewart (not Stuart as in Anbinder⁵) Maxwell oversaw management of Palmerston s Ahamlish . He was not a local agent; rather, he was an employee at the Stewart and Kincaid office in Dublin. Second, Anbinder errs in stating that in the 1840s Malachi Brennan was the Catholic priest of Drumcliff (a parish adjacent to Ahamlish). He was the Parish Priest of Ahamlish. Third, John Wynne was not an Ahamlish landowner . He owned lands in other parishes within the Barony of Carbury⁶, of which Ahamlish was a relatively small part.

In his analysis of the background to the emigrations of 1847, Anbinder refers to legislation aimed at provision of relief. It is important to be clear on such matters.

The Poor Relief Act of 1838 provided for establishment of administrative districts called poor law unions for relief of the poor in Ireland. By 1845 the country was divided into 130 unions, each with a workhouse. *All* relief under the Act was to be in the workhouse. For defraying expenses, union administrators were empowered to levy *rates* (of taxation on local property valuations). Although the Act indicated⁷ that the poor-rate is to be paid by the occupiers , it laid down that where the parties have agreed thereto, the lessor may be rated instead . All

tenements, *whether rented or not*, were usually included in the rate. The fact that there was a huge number of small occupiers imposed unnecessary work on the authorities. This led to administrative change: under the Poor Law Amendment Act of August 1843, where the property rated is not of greater value than £4 [annually] ... the rate on such property shall be made on the immediate lessor . The government's initial response to the failure of the potato in 1845 was purchase of American corn, which arrived during the Spring of 1846 when depots were established for sales to local relief committees and others. Requisite funds of relief committees were furnished by private subscriptions assisted by government donations: they were not then financed under the poor laws. Also during the Summer of 1846, the government initiated public works, half the cost of which was as a grant from central government, the other half as a loan to be repaid by the local district out of grand jury (the precursors of county councils) taxation; thus, these public works, which were suspended in August, were not financed under the poor laws. Provision for public works was renewed a few weeks later. Under the Labour Rate Act of August 1846, the entire expense of public works to be initiated under the Act was made a local charge, to be defrayed by a tax similar to the poor rate. However, in February 1847 the financing of public works under the Act was retrospectively altered: central government made a grant of half of such expenditures. In January 1847 the government announced that it intended to terminate the public works. At the end of February preparations were made for a change in the relief system by passing the Temporary Relief Act, which directed that committees of specified composition be established to administer outdoor relief, usually thick soup, the expense to be financed out of the poor rates; however, when private subscriptions were made, the government donated an equal amount. Relief under this Act ended a few months later. The Poor Law Extension Act of June 1847 provided for relief in the workhouse or outside it. This sanction of outdoor relief, other than on a temporary basis

as under the Act of February, meant that by end-Summer 1847 virtually all expenditures on relief had become charges on property in Ireland through financing under the poor laws.

Anbinder's accounts of efforts to relieve distress are in some respects misleading or in error. The relief committee which he describes as 'the Sligo relief committee' was in fact that of the Barony of Carbury, which encompassed many parishes in north Sligo. His statement that in November 1846 approximately 544 men and boys found public works employment on Palmerston's estate, but 4,000 others who sought such work were turned away is misleading. John Lynch was the Stewart and Kincaid agent in Ahamlish. The relevant passages in his letter dated 5 November 1846 are that 'the number employed down here [on public works] on Lord Palmerston's Estate [is] about 544 men & boys I believe at the last meeting of the Relief Committee [of the Barony of Carbury] they were looking for employment for at least 4000 men'. Anbinder's statement seems to imply that 4,544 (mainly adult) males wanted public works employment on Palmerston's north Sligo estate; however, this number greatly exceeded all of such persons who were able-bodied on those lands. (Anbinder reports the population of Ahamlish in 1841 as 8,700. But it was not the case that virtually the entire population of Ahamlish resided on Palmerston lands: according to Kincaid in 1843, there were nearly 800' households on Palmerston's north Sligo estate. This included land owned by Palmerston in the parish of Drumcliff next to Ahamlish, though Anbinder does not seem to have been aware of this fact.)

On p. 455 Anbinder states that 'in early 1847 the government began to phase out public works and replace it with outdoor relief The means of financing aid changed as well. Irish property owners would now bear *all* the expense through increased poor rates (taxes).

Furthermore, wealthy landlords ... would now have to pay the poor tax of tenants renting land valued at £4 or less . Two sets of points are appropriate here: (i) The means of financing aid had been changed in August 1846 when legislation in effect made property owners liable for virtually the entire cost through increased local rates. Even before the introduction of government soup kitchens in the Spring of 1847, this legislation already applied to the financing of public works. It was only in February 1847 that the government *retrospectively* agreed to contribute 50% of the cost of those public works conducted under the legislation of August 1846. (ii) Under legislation of 1843 the landlord or, more accurately, the lessor was made administratively liable for all the poor rates levied on holdings valued at £4 or less. Thus, contrary to Anbinder's understanding, the alteration in arrangements for collection of poor rates did not commence in 1847. Furthermore, contrary to what Anbinder suggests, and as is argued in my draft chapter 1 (not seen by Anbinder), the arrangements of 1843 could have had little effect on landlord incentives to get rid of small tenants.

Anbinder states that the emigration idea seems to have originated with Gore-Booth . But an outline of pre-famine observations by Palmerston and his agents indicates that their thinking on emigration was probably independent of Gore-Booth influence.

About one third of Palmerston's townlands in north Sligo had been squared by mid-1842. Concurrent with squaring, the problem arose of how to respond to the excess population.

Several of the leases of middlemen on Ahamlish had been for the life of King William IV, who died on 20 June 1837. Kincaid saw this as providing an opportunity to get rid of undertenants. In a letter dated 24 June 1837 he indicated that he hoped to be supported by

Palmerston in the endeavour to thin the Estate of a portion of the population and create larger farms . On the front of this letter Palmerston noted: Kincaid recommending me to Thin the Population on the Townlands of which the Leases have Expired I have long ago made it my mind not to do so unjustifiable an act. I never yet have acted on so cruel a system If any can be persuaded to emigrate voluntarily well & good; but not a single creature shall be expelled .

In November 1837 Kincaid wrote to Palmerston about the lands out of lease, to be re-let following amalgamation. He indicated that he had offered the tenants there assistance to emigrate, and he wrote of the folly of a mass of human beings trying to subsist on tiny holdings when ample scope lay before them in the American colonies . Thus, some of Palmerston s north Sligo tenants were offered assisted emigration as early as 1837. In his evidence before the Devon Commission in 1843, Kincaid stated that about 280 of the 800 households on Palmerston s north Sligo estate were on the lands the leases of which had expired in 1837. These were the first of Palmerston s properties to be squared and, as Kincaid stated, Palmerston s distinct orders were, that no man should be dispossessed, unless he chose to go, and then he was to have assistance to enable him to go to America or elsewhere .

Until 1846 James Walker was Palmerston s chief agent in Sligo. In 1841 he informed Stewart and Kincaid: I have ... had 2 husbands and wives shipd. off from Milk Harbour. I have given your man from Drumfad [also in Ahamlish] an order for [£]5 to the Ship Broker for his passage . Within the correspondence in my possession, Walker s next reference to emigration is dated 12 March 1845, when he wrote to Stewart and Kincaid: I will attend to what you say on the Emigration System . On 23 March he wrote that he had 20 to 30 Emigrants ... for

Quebec . But the scale of assisted emigration was not in accord Lynch s view. It would be a good idea , he stated to the Devon Commission, if Lord Palmerston bought 2,000 acres of land ... in America ... and took the poor people off, and carried them out there, and let them the land as his tenants .

By December 1846 both Lynch and Dr West, the attendant at Palmerston s Ahamlish dispensary, seem to have abandoned hope that the population of the district could be perpetuated. On 13 December, West wrote to Kincaid: It would be much less expensive for Lord Palmerston to send out the half if possible of his tenantry than have to feed them here and get no rents It is the duty of all to try and give every assistance in their power to alleviate the suffering . It was only five days after West had sent this proposal that Lynch wrote the communication to Kincaid (quoted from the Stewart and Kincaid correspondence by Anbinder) in which he indicated that Gore-Booth had inquired whether Palmerston would be willing to share the costs of chartering one or more ships for emigration. Note that the letters of 13 and 18 December were written months *before* the opening of government soup kitchens financed from the poor rates. Note also that Palmerston s decision to initiate large-scale assisted emigration was apparently made in December 1846. Thus, Kincaid s letter to Palmerston dated 23 March 1847 informed: On the authority of your Lordship when in London last Christmas I have already chartered two vessels .

It was the Temporary Relief Act of end-February 1847 which first provided for outdoor relief, financed mainly from the poor rates. The soup kitchens, which it was intended would be maintained only until the harvest of 1847, were not opened instantly. It is therefore very unlikely that the decision to send the first two of Palmerston s emigrant ships reflected

initiation of outdoor relief on a temporary basis. This inference appears to be contrary to Anbinder's view.

The Poor Law Extension Act of June 1847 gave Palmerston major incentives to clear his estates of paupers. Because this Act made *long-term* provision for relief in the workhouse or outside it, the expenses in either case to be financed out of the poor rates, Palmerston's decision to extend the emigrations into the Autumn of 1847 probably *did* reflect his concern about tax liabilities under the poor laws.

In regard to emigration from Palmerston's Ahamlish district, at this stage it can be concluded:

(i) There is no evidence that what Anbinder calls 'the emigration idea' originated with Gore-Booth. The assisted emigration of the pre-famine years was intimately related to improvements in the form of 'squaring the land'. (ii) On first impression, it may be plausible to infer that the initial stages of the structured emigrations in 1847 were in response to the inquiry made by Gore-Booth to Lynch on 18 December 1846, in regard to whether Palmerston would be willing to share the costs of a joint programme of emigration. However, Lynch had already argued in favour of a major scheme of emigration. Note also that it was before Gore-Booth made his inquiry to Lynch that West wrote that it might be wise if Palmerston were to assist half of the tenantry in the Ahamlish district to emigrate. The numbers implied under West's proposal would have amounted to over 2,000 persons. Thus, although Palmerston's decision on large-scale emigration in 1847 was consistent with Gore-Booth's view, it was also consistent with the *prior* recommendations of persons in positions of responsibility on Palmerston's Ahamlish. (iii) Contrary to what Anbinder seems to think, Palmerston's emigration scheme of 1847 could not have been substantively related to the fact that landlords

were administratively responsible for payment of the poor rates on small holdings. In fact, Anbinder errs on relevant legislation. His reference to the first of these new laws on p. 455 seems to indicate that he thinks that the Poor Law Amendment Act (of 1843) *was subsequent to* the Temporary Relief Act of 1847; in any case, his note 27 indicates⁸ that he confuses the *Amendment* Act with the *Extension* Act. (iv) Palmerston's decision to extend his emigration scheme into the Autumn of 1847 probably did reflect the legislation of both February and June 1847.

Those who have read Anbinder's account have probably inferred that Palmerston's Sligo properties were in the Ahamlish district only, to the north of Sligo town. In fact, his lands included significant tracts in the Ballymote district to the south, and some of his assisted emigration in 1847 -- including most of those who sailed on the *Carricks* -- was from there.

Anbinder also creates an impression that Palmerston's assisted emigration was confined to the year in which his agents chartered ships. But before then Palmerston assisted in emigration on a small scale. It seems that most of this was through Liverpool and that the emigrants went there without escort. This placed them at risk of fraud. Thus, in 1846 a Government agent at Liverpool wrote to Stewart and Kincaid that the bearer together with his companion had been sent over here consigned to Keenan for a passage to New York This person has ... absconded. It will therefore be necessary for them to return to Dublin . Perhaps because the firm feared fraud, in 1848 some of Palmerston's assisted emigration was under escort through Liverpool. Thus, in June 1848 Edward Smyth, Palmerston's chief agent in Sligo, reported to Stewart and Kincaid that the merchant Kernaghan has taken his departure for Liverpool with 8 or 10 of our people, and will see them on Board Ship for New York. I settled with him for

all their passages . But escorting emigrants did not ensure ease of transfer to vessels bound for America, as is indicated in a letter dated November 1848 in which Smyth informed the firm that he had received a letter from Mr Coyne ... about the persons under his Charge for Emigration. I thought it the wisest plan to send Tom Higgins ... to ... Liverpool to look after Mr Coyne and the persons we sent over along with him It appears that the money which Tom Higgins handed to him, £52 he gave to the Emigrants, as he was very ill himself and unable to transact their business . What happened to these emigrants is unknown. Perhaps Coyne died of famine fever in Liverpool. It seems that he was a brother of a grocer in Sligo town, where Higgins was a publican.

Within the Stewart and Kincaid correspondence, the last letter specifically referring to assisted emigration from Palmerston lands during the famine is dated 26 December 1848, a year in which potato failure was similar in extent to that of 1846. This was a petition from John Scanlan of Tunnagh, to the south of Sligo town, who stated that he had a family of Ten persons [and] begs to recal to your recollection a promise ... that you would give the means of Emigrating to six of his family . Scanlan probably left for America early in 1849.

Assisted emigration from the Palmerston properties in 1848-9 may have been associated with squaring in the Ballymote district. How small the scale of such emigration was, it is impossible to decide, partly because one cannot clearly distinguish between assistance to emigrate and compensation of tenants who peaceably departed. Smyth's letters of 1848 make references to compensation of tenants who would leave without causing trouble. But in most cases, the compensation was probably no more than would facilitate migration to Britain (not then considered emigration).

We have no idea of how many tenants Palmerston assisted, specifically to emigrate, in the final years of the famine. But it seems that he continued to assist thereafter, up to the 1860s. Thus, in May 1862 a Sligo newspaper reported: In accordance with a custom of some years standing, about sixty persons have been selected for emigration from the Parish of Ahamlish ... whose passages and outfit has been provided by his Lordship. They consist of twenty-four young girls, and twenty young men ... [and] families who were wholly unable to support themselves ... who had asked the favour of being sent out The emigrants took their passages ... this day, for Liverpool, en route for America ⁹.

That many of those on Palmerston's chartered ships in 1847 experienced extreme hardship has been documented by Anbinder and others. Hardship was most severe among those on vessels arriving at their destinations after the severe Winter of British North America had begun to set in. Some historians have questioned whether this reflected lack of humane feelings on the part of Palmerston and his agents. Although Anbinder's treatment of this question is not generally unfair, it involves inconsistency. Thus, on pp. 464-5 he states that it was cruel to send out emigrants whose only option upon arrival in Canada was residence in an almshouse or begging Stewart and Kincaid knew perfectly well that the emigrants' pleadings should not have been the deciding factor in determining whether or not the last ships should have sailed to America . However, on p. 466 Anbinder adds that had he realized the implications of sending out emigrants so late, Palmerston or his agents probably would have cancelled those final voyages .

In making an assessment of whether those on board the late departures from Sligo were treated humanely, note the following:

(i) Both before and after the famine, Palmerston treated his tenantry with dignity. There is no presumption that 1847 was an exception.

(ii) One historian describes the period 1841 to mid-1846 as Palmerston's longest holiday . Palmerston's relative withdrawal from politics in those years enabled him to monitor developments, and to implement improvements, in Sligo. By mid-1846 he was back in Government, which preoccupation accounts for his fading into the background, and delegating authority, on *all* matters pertaining to his Irish estates in the later 1840s.

(iii) Anbinder quotes from a manuscript by William Kernaghan, which states that Palmerston intended conditions on board the ships of 1847 to be, in effect, on the verge of luxury. Anbinder correctly states that this document was definitely written after Palmerston's death in 1865; it is in fact watermarked 1870. But in assessing Kernaghan's objectivity, note that he was one of those engaged in overseeing the emigrations of 1847.

(iv) Some historians, including Anbinder, have quoted from two letters to Palmerston dated 3 and 16 December 1847, from Stewart and Kincaid in defence of their emigration arrangements. Those letters may have been written on a presumption that they might be subjected to public scrutiny, as indeed they were. (Their content was printed in a parliamentary publication, which explains how historians have been able to quote from them). The tone of the second letter suggests that it was written in the *hope* that its contents would be publicized. In assessing the real intentions of Stewart and Kincaid on the emigrations of 1847, three letters *between* the two partners in the firm are more reliable: one cannot sensibly accuse them of boasting ¹⁰ or of propaganda, therein.

(v) The first of those letters refers to the arrival in New Brunswick of the *Eliza Liddell*. News of the protests there did not reach Dublin until mid-November 1847, when Stewart wrote that he was sorry to tell you that the shipment to Shippegan which Maxwell with best intention took such a fancy to has turned out a very bad business The poor fellows appear to suffer greatly from destitution and disease . This does not indicate any lack of concern for the welfare of Palmerston s emigrants. Famine disease was extensive in 1847 among both those who emigrated and those who stayed at home; in fact, in November 1847 Kincaid informed Palmerston that Smyth had contracted typhus in attending to the *Aeolus* emigrants. The second intra-firm letter refers to the *Aeolus*, which berthed at St John, New Brunswick, on 2 November. Stewart could only acknowledge in regard to the St Johns [meaning St John] Emigrants We did not inform ourselves enough of the circumstances of the place they were sent to & the suitable seasons I think above £100 was laid out in getting them some clothing better than their own wretched Rags I think ... of ... the unpleasantness of a Person in Ld. Palmerstons position being mixed with any act that may be considered careless or cruel towards the poor Emigrants . A third letter internal to the firm refers to purchase of food: in May 1848 Stewart wrote that Walker Junr. of Sligo has just been here about Boyles & his Fathers Claim for Provisions for Emigrants last year. I gave him to understand that we were inclined to Settle these a/c s but wanted a long day . Boyle was a grocer in Sligo town. The fact that Stewart wanted a long day suggests that the food bill for the 1847 emigrants was a large one.

Unlike the two letters of December 1847 from Stewart and Kincaid to Palmerston, the second extract from Stewart to Kincaid, quoted above, attributes some of the blame for the hardship, experienced by the *Aeolus* passengers, to the firm s ignorance on geography and climate.

Similar observations applied to those on board the *Richard Watson*, which reached Quebec on 8 November. But given information available to Stewart and Kincaid from James Miley, American packet agent in Dublin, the firm should have been aware of the dangers of emigration into the harsh climate of British North America late in the year. Thus, on 28 September 1847, Stewart informed Kincaid: Miley can send ... to either New York or New Orleans, but not so late to Quebec. They all go from Liverpool New Orleans he recommends for the late Season .

Along with other evidence in my draft chapters 2 and 3, the three communications internal to the firm of Stewart and Kincaid suggest: (a) that the partners were genuinely concerned for the welfare of Palmerston's tenants and former tenants but (b) that the hardships imposed on those who travelled on the later departures from Sligo in 1847 largely reflected ignorance rather than indifference or malice on the part of Palmerston's agents.

¹ See, for example, Cecil Woodham-Smith, *The great hunger* (London, 1962), pp. 228-30.

² See especially John McTernan, *Memory harbour, the port of Sligo* (Sligo, 1992), part two, pp. 26-35, 71-83. The principal printed sources used by Anbinder in describing the ships which sailed in 1847 with Palmerston emigrants, and for his descriptions of the emigrants condition, are similar to, but more complete than, McTernan's. Anbinder also refers to Joe McGowan, *In the shadow of Benbulbin* (n.p., 1993). On the findings of those researchers

Anbinder states that their failure to utilize either Palmerston's papers or those of his estate agent limit their usefulness. McGowan *did* utilize the Palmerston papers. Also, Anbinder's criticism of McGowan and McTernan for their failure to utilize the Stewart and Kincaid papers, in my possession, is *unfair and out of place*: the existence of those materials was unknown to historians when McGowan and McTernan were conducting their research, and when Anbinder himself (who used my typescripts rather than the original Stewart and Kincaid papers) commenced his!

³ In 1998 I was not aware that Anbinder might publish a piece specifically on the famine emigration from Palmerston's estates. My understanding was that he was preparing a book the tentative title of which (as he informed me) was *Five points: nineteenth-century America's most infamous slum*, and that this was to include material on Irish emigration to that slum. I accordingly authorized Anbinder to quote selected passages from my typescripts and to refer to findings relevant to his book. On 30 October 1998 I informed him: The title of my draft book is *Landlords, Tenants, Famine: Letters of an Irish Land Agent in the 1840s*. The quotes you use from me [in a draft chapter for your book] are all (or almost all) from my Chap. 3. I would prefer you to refer to this chapter rather than to Norton Collection. In his *HJ* contribution, and *further* contrary to the understanding of 1998, Anbinder refers to Norton manuscript.

⁴ See the Preface to Samuel Lewis, *A topographical dictionary of Ireland* (London, 1837).

⁵ This error appeared in the drafts which I sent to Anbinder in 1998.

⁶ *County of Sligo, valuation of the several tenements in the union of Sligo* (Dublin 1858), pp. 1-31.

⁷ The extracts in the present paragraph are drawn from summaries in George Nicholls, *A history of the Irish poor law* (London, 1856), pp. 222-404.

⁸ Anbinder cites three sources for what he states about the new law on rates on small holdings (under the *Amendment Act*); but the authors he cites refer to the *Extension Act*.

⁹ Quoted by McTernan, part two, p. 53.

¹⁰ On p. 464 Anbinder writes that the agents boasted that they had spent more than £100 on clothes. Anbinder does not indicate that the £100-plus, mentioned in the firm's letter of 16 December to Palmerston, was the amount spent on clothing for the *Aeolus* passengers alone.