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UNDER/ SEC 25 NOV 1996 CENT SEC

Handwritten notes:
209/116
Mr. Cassas.
Mr. Jamise
File.
26
21 November 1996

Handwritten list:
1 cc Mr. Stephens
Mr. Williams
Mr. Bell
2. Mrs. Secu
3. McGibbon
4. Dack to repl.

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Agree with document

Handwritten notes:
26.11
in copy
McGibbon

Peter Westmacott Esq
WASHINGTON

Handwritten: Dear Peter

IRISH POTATO FAMINE

1. When I wrote to you on 24 October, I copied my letter to Peter Holmes at the Department of Education in Northern Ireland. It seemed to me worth establishing whether there were any relevant textbooks on the Irish Famine used in schools there. Peter has sent me the enclosed paper, prepared by Dan McCall of the NI Schools Inspectorate, which describes the non-prescriptive approach adopted by DENI. Although Peter suggests that the particular circumstances of Northern Ireland impose constraints which do not exist in New York, I thought you should have the paper, as it may help you and your colleagues to know how the subject is dealt with in that particular environment.

2. In his covering letter to me, Peter Holmes says that the note will reinforce my view that, however revisionist modern historians may be, Britain cannot come out of the story well. There are, I think, rather a lot of stones which are best left unturned. On the assumption, however, that the issue may be taken up elsewhere than in New York, Ted Hallett is preparing a summary of historians' views on the Famine which we shall, of course, let you have in due course.

3. I have just seen Peter Reid's letter to you of 15 November in which he asks about officially sanctioned texts. We enter difficult territory if we come near to establishing a Government view of a contentious episode in 19th century history. Ted Hallett's piece (which we had put on hold earlier this year) will provide a quarry of historical references. Mr McCall's paper may be of some help too. But my feeling is that anything which can be identified as British Government propaganda may, as Peter Reid goes on

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to confirm, be directly counter-productive. So my presumption remains that it is best to point to the views of respectable historians as a counterpoint to hostile comment, rather than assert a Government position. But I look forward to your advice on how best to address the issue.

Your ever,
Donald
Donald A Lamont

S. 22/11
cc: Ms Bharucha, IPL
Mr Whitaker, NAD
Mr Clarke, Dublin
Mr Innes, BIS New York

THE GREAT FAMINE

TREATMENT IN NORTHERN IRELAND CURRICULUM AND SCHOOLS

HISTORICAL REFERENCES

1. The Northern Ireland Curriculum (NIC) Programme of Study for history in Key Stage 3 (normally in year 10) requires the teaching of "Rural Ireland and the impact of the Great Famine, for example emigration and the land question." In KS2 (normally in year 7) schools are required to teach Life in Victorian Times; the Famine itself is not stipulated but is mentioned as an example of what might be taken up. The programme of study does not set down how the topic might be taught or where an emphasis might be put.

2. I am not aware of any recent publication produced for schools dealing only with the Great Famine. That said, schools will often produce their own teaching units for such a topic, especially if the teachers intend to pursue the issue in some depth. I am aware of several recently produced textbooks which touch on the subject. The Blackstaff Press has published in 1996 "Life in Victorian Ireland" (Deirdre Brown of the UFTM is one of the 2 authors); this is aimed at primary schools. The Famine story is presented through a combination of chronological narrative and the use of source materials. Positions are not taken, the selected material is left, as it were, to "speak" for itself. The Government's role is noted in terms of its public works and soup kitchen programmes and their effectiveness, or otherwise. Cambridge University Press has also published in 1996 "Nationalism and Unionism" (the authors are a BELB history support officer and a local history teacher, its editor is Jonathan Bardon). It devotes a chapter to the Famine; its treatment is largely factual and narrative and like its primary counterpart, it notes briefly the effective and ineffective aspects of the Government's response. It does not attempt to encourage pupils to reach a view about the adequacy or inadequacy of that response. A third recent publication "Divided Island" (also published in 1996 by Colourpoint Press) is the work of history support officers from 3 of the education and library boards. This publication is aimed specifically at lower attaining KS3 pupils. Its treatment of the Famine is very limited; it does not, for example, refer to the number who died or emigrated. It mentions the Government's action on soup kitchens.

3. It is clear from the above publications that the controversial issue of the Famine is treated in a very circumspect manner. No direct attempt is made to apportion blame or to have the pupils come to an overall judgement about the merits or demerits of the response made by Government or other agencies. That this is the case should not be surprising. The teaching of history in Northern Ireland over the last 25 years of civil unrest has itself been a controversial matter. Teaching history in a divided society such as Northern Ireland, especially controversial topics, or topics which have a bearing on how the 2 communities in Northern Ireland perceive themselves, is a challenging and risky undertaking. The practice has evolved that teachers will not ignore controversial issues but will deal with them in a most careful manner, involving consideration of the basic facts and the use of some documentary sources which provide different perspectives on the matter in question. Pupils will usually have brought to their notice a range of views but will not be pressed to reach a conclusion about the rights and wrongs of a particular situation. To do otherwise, in the view of many teachers, is to risk antagonising (some) parents

and children who may feel strongly that "their" particular community's perception of its history is being challenged in too rigorous a manner. Teachers who work in areas where paramilitary groups are strongly placed are especially conscious that they can face competition from a history of the streets, a history which seeks from the past justification for political programmes today. The Famine is a topic capable of generating strong views and teachers will be wary about going beyond the basic facts. In west and north Belfast, for example, the anniversary of the Famine has been commemorated by a series of large and impressive wall murals. These mostly reflect strongly republican and nationalist sentiments and an anti-British view. Teachers in these areas, given the prominence of these murals and their overtly political message, would be careful indeed in exploring too deeply controversial aspects of the Famine, particularly those which touched on the adequacy or otherwise of the British Government's response from 1845-50.

4. In considering its position on the controversy in New York the Foreign Office will be very aware that much turns on the use of the term genocide. Given a dictionary definition of a planned and deliberate destruction of a people, the FO could well challenge the validity of such a term; that stated, the FO also should be advised clearly that there is likely to be little comfort for the Government if schools in New York (or elsewhere) should investigate the nature of the then British Government's response to the Famine.

5. For those teachers who go beyond the published textbooks in their search for teaching materials, it is highly likely that they will find the judgements of academic historians to be mostly critical of the adequacy of the Government's response to the Famine. For example :

a) Professor JC Beckett (QUB) : an historian from the unionist tradition whose highly regarded work, "The Making of Modern Ireland 1603-1923", expresses the view that the "Inefficient character of government action in Ireland (resulted) mainly from the economic principles on which it was based"; that "... no one could doubt that if a comparable crisis had arisen in England the Government would have ensured adequate supplies of food, at whatever cost to the economy". In addition, he refers to a telling comment delivered by one of his agents in Ireland to Sir Charles Trevelyan (the assistant secretary to the Treasury and the key government officer involved in directing the British response to the Famine) that he (Trevelyan) "... cannot answer the cry of want by a quotation from political economy."

b) Professor RF Foster : an historian whose work "Modern Ireland 1600 - 1972" has been acclaimed in very many quarters home and abroad, whose views on Irish history would be in the revisionist camp and who would be opposed by those historians who take issue with what has been regarded in some quarters as his anti-nationalist standpoint. Foster's judgements are often critical of the Government's response. He does note that the crisis was "beyond the powers either of the existing state apparatus or the prevalent conceptions of social responsibility - in Ireland at least." He further points out that "Fundamentally, however, relief was up to government initiative and this, in the long run, was not up to the challenge"; that the government "machinery ... was not capable of bearing the unprecedentedly huge weight. Within both the government and the Treasury, humanitarian impulses came up against a violent disapproval of subsidised improvement schemes; there was also an attitude, often unconcealed, that Irish fecklessness and lack of economy (***) were bringing a retribution that would work out for the best in the end." (Trevelyan's views on

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this point are best summarised in a letter of December 2 1846 when he wrote, "The great evil with which we have to contend (is) not the physical evil of the famine, but the moral evil of the selfish, perverse and turbulent character of the people."); that "many starved through bureaucracy" and that Trevelyan held views (for example, in his "Irish Crisis" of 1848) that "the Famine was the design of a benign Malthusian God who sought to relieve overpopulation by natural disaster."

c) Historians and writers of history from Canada and the USA can be scathing in their comments. Donald Mac Kay, a Canadian in his "Flight from Famine: The Coming of the Irish to Canada" (1990) offers a particularly bitter comment, "Just how much Peel could have done is questionable since the cause of Ireland's tragedy lay in centuries of abusive colonialism and a social system that suppressed the rural population (the Whig government from 1846) saw fit to provide less help than Peel had secured for a considerably lesser crisis the previous year. Common sense fell prey to economic dogma, to the inadequacies of a distant government and to civil servants accustomed to treating the Irish less as a people than as specimens to be observed in an administrative laboratory."

6. It is the case that evidence can be advanced to demonstrate positive examples of the Government's response. Acknowledgement is also needed, if a full and fair understanding of this complex and unfortunate period is to be attained, that the constraints arising from Irish social, geographical and logistical circumstances, as well as the political and economic principles of the day, contributed substantially to the undermining of relief efforts. All these notwithstanding, any consideration of the Famine cannot escape from the harsh and tragic reality of the estimated 1 million dead from starvation and disease and the flight from a stricken country of some 1 million more to Canada, the USA and to Britain.

Conclusion

i) The complicated and challenging situation in which many history teachers find themselves in NI, reflected (for example) in the methods and circumspection they employ in teaching history in a deeply divided society and the approaches taken in recent publications which touch on the Famine, offer little that the FO could usefully take up in its efforts to counter developments in New York. Local NI circumstances are too different, the tensions too real.

ii) The charge of genocide may well be refuted by reference to the historical and historiographical record. Furthermore, it is the case that Ireland in the 1840s cannot be considered only from the perspective of the late 20th century and that the Government's efforts had positive outcomes. When, however, the Famine as a whole is considered, the FO is likely to find but cold comfort in the general conclusions of academic historians and writers of popular history. The sum of their verdicts is not favourable.

iii) Genocide may well be unsustainable as a charge; but those who would wish to do so can level other lesser but telling charges for which strong evidence is readily available. Official papers and other sources contain much that is impossible to dismiss and the evidence is of a kind which will draw a strong reaction; the unsigned manuscript contained in the Distress Papers of 1847 is but typical, "Oh, pity us. Oh what must we do and what will become of us. Pity us here scarce half alive." In seeking to contest such developments as are

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coming forward in New York, the FO should be aware that the story of the Great Famine in Ireland is one from which very few groups active at the time, other than the Quakers, emerge with any credit.

D McCall

DENI History Inspectorate

30 October 1996