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‘The British Empire’s other famine in 1847: The Irish Famine and the Mauritian Crisis’

In 1847 crop failure and financial crisis threatened to cause mass starvation in the British Empire—not just in Ireland, but also Mauritius. The two cases are very similar. On both islands agriculture was dominated by a monoculture crop that was decimated by new a disease: potatoes in Ireland and sugar cane in Mauritius. Both suffered severe trade deficits and financial problems. In Ireland the number of bank notes in circulation halved between 1846 and 1849, while in Mauritius bank-note circulation fell by nearly 95% between 1845 and 1847. Virtually all specie drained out from Mauritius to finance food imports, on which its population was entirely reliant for nourishment. As a result, one of the two main Mauritian banks collapsed in 1848, along with four of the five British commercial houses that had financed most of the island’s sugar production and bought in food. Yet the British government’s response to the crisis in Mauritius averted mass mortality, while it failed to achieve this in Ireland. Using government records and financial information collected from archives in Britain, Ireland and Mauritius, this paper compares the policy responses of the British government to the two crises. For both, a supply of money was allocated for relief raised by local taxes, after initial assistance by advances made from the Imperial Treasury. Local elites were charged with the responsibility of organising the relief efforts on the ground. For Ireland, the ideas of the Currency School and Bank Charter Act prevented further loans being raised after the “Irish loan” crisis of early 1847. In contrast, in Mauritius, under the influence of *laissez-faire* opponents of the Bank Charter Act, Britain’s Colonial Office implemented a set of heterodox economic policies, including setting up the world’s first currency board, which helped to generate the finance that enabled Mauritius to avoid catastrophe. The conclusion drawn from this comparison is that debates over famine policy in the British Empire in the late 1840s were less an ideological battle between advocates of *laissez-faire* and intervention, and more one between financial orthodoxy and heterodoxy over monetary policy. It also questions the direction of some recent post-revisionist scholarship on the Irish famine, which blames colonialism for Britain’s neglect of Ireland, whereas British policy was in fact more successful in combating famine and financial crisis in its formal colonies than in constituent parts of the United Kingdom during this period.