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â€™Eternity's commissionerâ€™™: Thomas Carlyle, the Great Irish Famine and the geopolitics of travel

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Abstract

In 1846 and again in 1849 the Scottish born historian and social critic, Thomas Carlyle, travelled Ireland accompanied by the Irish nationalist Charles Gavan Duffy. Significantly, these dates profile the beginning and the deadly culmination of the Great Irish Famine. It is somewhat surprising, therefore, that Carlyle's published memoirs of his travels and his various pamphlets on Ireland have merited little scholarly attention. As well as addressing this oversight this paper attempts to place Carlyle's travel writing within the ideological contours of the Great Famine and, to this end, I outline a specific example of what I call the â€™geopolitics of travelâ€™™. Principally this paper offers an empirical and theoretical analysis of how powerful political rationalities are produced at the â€™contact zoneâ€™™ of two cultures. I consider Carlyle's shift from being a critic of laissez-faire to being a defender of property and argue that this parallels his propensity to qualify what amounts

to human value through environmental and racial readings of the Famine. Finally, I briefly suggest that such calculations take us into the domain of "governmentality"™ and capitalist political economy, perhaps the two most powerful forces directing the course of the Irish Famine.



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