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The Early Economic Writings of William Thomas Thornton

Mark Donoghue

Ebenezer Scrooge: The Treadmill and
the Poor Law are in full vigour, then?
— Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol* (1843)

William Thomas Thornton (1813–1880) is now best remembered for his attempt in the late 1860s and early 1870s to address issues in the theories of value and distribution. His efforts culminated in an attack on the classical wage fund doctrine that allegedly elicited a famous “recantation” from his particular friend and East India Company colleague, John Stuart Mill (Lipkes 1999, 110). While the details of Mill’s “dramatic surrender” remain, to this day, one of the most contentious issues in the history of economic thought, few critics dispute the significance of this episode to the development of economic analysis in the third quarter of

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the nineteenth century. The ensuing controversy prompted one historian to declare that Thornton's assault, and Mill's subsequent capitulation, may have "provided the basis for [Alfred] Marshall's virtual transformation of the classical ideas" (Bharadwaj 1978, 255).¹

As a recent review article contends, "It is highly unfortunate that Thornton's reputation has depended critically upon his attack on the laws of supply and demand" (Ekelund and Thornton 2001). This focus has, in the view of the authors, served to detract attention from a thorough, more detailed examination of his earlier economic writings. This is regrettable, the authors note, because his early work "brings to light the extended reach of Thornton's inquiry and forces readers to go beyond his infamous attack on the laws of supply and demand to view his approach and substantive contributions to other subjects" (513). "These neglected early studies," the authors further note, "contain far more than merely a kernel of brilliance, a point that was not missed by J. S. Mill."

John Stuart Mill's (1806–1873) respect and affection for Thornton was initiated at India House, their mutual place of employment, when the younger Thornton promptly sent Mill a complimentary copy of his literary debut, *Over-population and Its Remedy* (1846), thinking it a subject that would interest him. The significance of Thornton's initial foray into economics is underlined by its role in consolidating Mill's own views on some of the great issues that dominated Victorian public life. Mill absorbed the book, seizing upon its various themes, which he then incorporated into his own work. These revolved around controversial issues such as Poor Law reform, protection of "child labour," the enclosure movement and the "rights" of the poor, and the so-called Irish land question. At the time, Mill himself was busy addressing, through a series of articles for the *Morning Chronicle*, the shocking consequences of the failure in the 1840s of the potato harvest in Ireland. It was during this formative period, moreover, that he exhorted Thornton to redouble his efforts at expounding on his treatment of Irish land tenure reform. This culminated in the publication, two years later, of *A Plea for Peasant Proprietors* (1848), a work that was decisive in establishing Thornton's literary reputation among the intellectual and political elite of Victorian England.

Another interesting facet of Thornton's early work is his application of the apparatus of classical economics to the most pressing public policy questions of the day, as is highlighted in both *Over-population and*

1. See White 1994 and Donoghue 1997 for further discussion of this point.

Its Remedy and its sequel, *A Plea for Peasant Proprietors*. As was the case with other Victorian social reformers, Thornton displayed skepticism about the government's ability to improve the lives of ordinary people and "distrusted . . . the ability of government to do much to aid the poor" (Ekelund and Thornton 2001, 529). Nevertheless, he remained tolerant in his views concerning government interference where the objective was the treatment and relief of the poor. Economic and social realities, in his opinion, sometimes necessitated a wider range of government involvement in the economic sphere. He laid particular stress upon the role of basic education in the development of social and moral conduct and elevation of character, all of which he viewed as prerequisites for the economic betterment of the downtrodden. This pragmatism, instances of which surface repeatedly in Thornton's early writings, bears the imprint of the then-prevailing stream of classical thought.

While Thornton's appreciation of classical economics and interpretation of the contemporary debates within its analytical framework was lucid, the conclusions he reached were sometimes at variance with classical orthodoxy. These remain a salutary reminder of the manner in which classical economists responded to the momentous events of the day in dissimilar yet impressive ways. Attention must be drawn, however, to the ways in which Thornton's "romanticism" provoked certain departures from classical doctrines, especially in relation to the remedies he proposed for resolving rural overpopulation and impoverishment throughout the British Isles. The romanticism, in his case, consisted of an idealization of "peasant proprietors" whose "golden age" had reached its apogee in England during the Middle Ages. Thornton's admiration (like Mill's) for the small tenant farmer or yeoman stemmed from his belief in farming as invaluable in promoting moral qualities, in particular the virtuous (to his mind) habits of conduct (such as self-reliance and strengthening of character) that would ultimately raise the aspirations of the laboring classes. Ultimately, for Thornton, peasant proprietorship remained the most decisive solution for the rejuvenation of the rural economy.

The aim of this article is to evaluate Thornton's early contributions to the great public debates of the mid-Victorian period. Specifically, it reveals his methods for resolving pressing public concerns of the day through the application of the postulates of classical economics. It also highlights the divergence of his conclusions from the orthodox formulations prescribed by some leading classical writers. The remainder of the article is organized as follows. The first section covers briefly Thornton's views on the

causes of and remedies for overpopulation and poverty in rural Britain. Sections 2 and 3 discuss his views, respectively, on the Old Poor Laws and the New Poor Laws. Section 4 reviews his recommendations on the reform of the industrial workplace and factory system. Section 5 covers his views on land tenure reform, with special reference to the so-called Irish land question. The next section presents a variety of responses by leading Victorian figures to Thornton's early economic writings. It also highlights the pastoral verse he published in the 1850s as a literary device intended to extol the virtues of a bygone agrarian era. Some concluding remarks follow in section 7.

1. Overpopulation and Poverty

Thornton's own understanding of, and response to, the economic and social malaise associated with the widespread impoverishment of rural and urban areas was grounded firmly in the central tenets of classical political economy. Far from attempting a theoretical contribution to the subject, his acceptance of classical principles and precepts, notably, the Malthusian principle of population, the classical wage fund doctrine, and the Ricardian theory of international trade, suggests that the analytical apparatus of classical political economy was capable of yielding practical lessons and positive outcomes (see Black 1960, 245, for further comment). This state of affairs belies the "wholesale rejection of classical economics" that he came to be associated with later in life (Lipkes 1999, 110). At this formative stage of his authorial career, he applied the machinery of classical economics to the most pressing public policy questions of the day, namely, the repeal of the Corn Laws, the reform of the Poor Laws, the protection of child laborers, and the so-called Irish question.

Relying on official reports as well as historical and contemporary accounts of poverty and overpopulation in the British Isles, Thornton set about carefully delineating the parlous standards of living among rural and urban workers throughout Britain, while simultaneously noticing any modifications in legislation, such as the introduction of and amendments to the Poor Laws and the enactment and repeal of the Corn Laws, that operated either to promote or alleviate widespread impoverishment.²

2. An avid reader, Thornton pored over numerous government-commissioned reports compiled by expert committees investigating the causes of overpopulation and impoverishment in both the manufacturing towns and agricultural districts of Britain. These included the Poor Inquiry Commissioners' Report, of 1834; the report of the Committee on Combinations of

Most classical economists in the Victorian age advocated legislative action purported to relieve rural and urban “destitution” (see Crouch 1967, Gordon 1971, and Robbins 1978 for further discussion). Thornton was no exception. He supported emigration programs intended to ameliorate “population pressures” and sanctioned statutory poor relief as a device to alleviate the suffering of the aged and infirm as well as the young and able-bodied. Yet these measures were never considered anything other than *temporary* expedients. He was always particularly active in supporting those statutory measures intended to *permanently* alleviate overpopulation and poverty, notably, land tenure reform and national education. He especially recommended government legislation that attempted to raise *both* the moral *and* economic aspirations of society’s less-advantaged members. Indeed, “it was now thought to be the duty,” he remarked, “of a community to maintain all its [responsible] members in comfort” (Thornton 1846, 213). Furthermore, Thornton strongly encouraged acts of private philanthropy and remonstrated with the scions of the landowning classes who thoughtlessly absolved themselves of their customary civic responsibilities.

In *Over-population and Its Remedy*, Thornton (1846, 3) laid the groundwork by defining rural Britain’s main economic problem as a situation in which “persons able to work are unable to procure employment.” The resulting unemployment, he hypothesized, was attributable to the lack of “the [wage] fund for the . . . comfortable maintenance of the whole body of labourers” (284). The implication, he further explained, was that the wage fund—a predetermined fund of wage goods destined for the maintenance of labor over the period of production—was insufficient for maintaining full employment. This deliberate reference to the wage fund doctrine in explaining rural unemployment, coupled with the remedies Thornton proposed for alleviating the situation, bear the hallmarks of a *classical* training in economics. Thus, he wrote: “In every place there is only a certain amount of work to be done, and only a certain amount of capital to pay for it; and, if the number of workmen be more than proportionate to the work, employment can only be given to those who want it by taking it from those who have it” (205).

Workmen, of 1838; the report of the Highland Emigration Committee, of 1841; the Census of Ireland, of 1841; the reports on employment of women and children in agriculture, of 1843; and several others. Also cited as supporting evidence were related publications on the subject, including letters to the *Times* and parliamentary debates in *Hansard*.

The signal importance of this passage lies in its candid acceptance of the classical wage fund doctrine as the organizing principle around which to explore the causes of and remedies for rural overpopulation in Britain.³ Orthodox nineteenth-century classical economists, such as John McCulloch and Nassau Senior, embraced this doctrine inasmuch as it succeeded in explaining rural overpopulation in terms of the underlying structural imbalances between capital and labor within the agrarian economy.⁴ This situation had deteriorated throughout the first half of the nineteenth century due to the changing structure of the British economy; rapidly industrializing yet predominantly agrarian, it witnessed the decline of its handicraft industry while its dependence on agriculture gradually diminished, and as its dependence on industry subsequently rose. These circumstances succeeded in applying downward pressure on the wages of rural workers. The consequence was a lower general standard of living in agricultural households, precipitating large-scale migrations that relocated rural workers in search of jobs into the urban areas.

Thornton (1846, 29) pinpointed another factor responsible for rural impoverishment in the tendency of agricultural workers to marry early and subsequently raise large families: “early marriages,” he opined, “are very prevalent amongst them, and in most cottages children are more numerous than the adult inmates.”⁵ He believed, moreover, that the resulting

3. Thornton’s early-nineteenth-century use of the classical wage fund concept in describing a pattern of behavior in the labor market is ironical, considering the later notoriety surrounding his critique of the classical wage fund doctrine. At midcentury, however, there was insufficient warning of the renunciation of the doctrine later closely associated with him; he adopted the approach of an orthodox classical economist to the problem of rural overpopulation (see Lipkes 1996, 116, 119–122; and Donoghue 1997, 1998). Nevertheless, he seemed to appreciate the limitations of the wage fund doctrine as a theory of wage determination, as seen in the following passage: “The labouring population has hitherto been spoken of as if it formed only one class, but it is really divided into several, among which the rates of remuneration are far from being uniform” (Thornton 1846, 10). He added, “It might be supposed that competition would render the price of labour everywhere the same, and that the only differences in the rate of wages would arise from the superior hardship or delicacy of particular occupations. . . . In reality, various causes, both natural and artificial, prevent labour from flowing freely in every direction,” so that “wages, consequently, vary exceedingly in different occupations” (10). The sport of “killing the wage fund doctrine” became increasingly popular in the 1860s.

4. This explains why rural overpopulation has been described as a classic problem of structural unemployment in a rapidly industrializing but still predominantly agricultural economy (see Blaug 1963, 154–55; 1964, 229).

5. Thornton recognized the role of rural migration in mitigating the increase in marriage and birth rates; empirical evidence supports this view, detailing an increase in the birth rate in the 1840s, with a corresponding decrease in the death rate (see Blaug 1956, 45, for further comment).

spiritual and economic deprivation under which these children were raised resulted in an aversion to hard work and a lack of social responsibility (“vicious habits, inherited from a long line of ancestors” [Thornton 1848, 241]), cementing his view that the poor should practice abstinence and refrain from marrying “until they can do so without imprudence” (Thornton 1846, 385). By this time, the Malthusian argument intended to rouse the lower classes to exercise “moral restraint” had largely been discredited (see Blaug 1956, 44–49, for further discussion). Thornton (1846, 117–18), however, evaluated the “first principles of Malthus’s theory” as being “so self-evident, that notwithstanding the prevalent fashion to oppose every opinion maintained by that writer, it seems sufficient to state them simply without adding a syllable in their support.” Specifically, Thornton interpreted Malthus as having argued that “people ought not to marry until they are able to maintain [financially and morally] the children they are likely to have” (270). If necessary, this meant “restraining people from marrying until they can bear the expenses of a family” (268). This, in Thornton’s view, constituted “the very essence of Malthusianism, in all [its] naked simplicity” (268). In the heat of his expoundings, Thornton appeared not to entertain the possibility of subsistence actually increasing at a greater rate than population. Nor could he conceive of the profound role of contraceptives in fundamentally reshaping the demographic.

By midcentury it had generally been acknowledged that the fears of Malthusians were greatly exaggerated. In fact the “total eclipse” of the Malthusian principle of population had largely been achieved by the early 1830s, when several leading classical economists (among them Nassau Senior and Robert Torrens) and numerous popular economic scribblers, upon investigating its empirical content, found it wanting and summarily abandoned it.⁶ While Thornton (1846, 268) seemed reconciled to the fact that “few are now found bold enough to avow them [the Malthusian principles],” they remained in his opinion “as undeniable, as the sun at mid-day.” He also seemed innately aware of the harsh social implications of the Malthusian argument that “deprive[d] the poor of the

6. Hoppen (1998, 19, 20, 21) observes that the “bad experiences of [agricultural] labourers during the decades immediately after 1815” resulted in the number of agricultural laborers falling “by two-fifths between 1851 and 1891,” at a time “when the overall population of England and Wales rose by more than three-fifths.” “In absolute terms,” he further argues, “the farm workers’ lot remained miserable.” It is hardly surprising, then, that rural crime “reached its peak in the British countryside as a whole in the 1840s.”

privilege of matrimony,” yet nevertheless maintained that a limited family size would typically presage a higher standard of living. Once the poorer classes began to occupy “their leisure time agreeably and profitably,” he wrote, they would develop a taste for these additional comforts and begin to desire smaller families (372). It should be remembered that, while many economic commentators confidently predicted that the population principle had ceased “to play a part in a theory of distribution” by the early 1830s (Fetter 1969, 74), it was nevertheless widely recognized by contemporaries as both a real and potent force, not least due to its patronage by John Stuart Mill as the fulcrum in his own program of land tenure reform and income distribution (Blaug 1956, 48, 58).

Another central purpose of Thornton’s first book involved prescribing several methods for alleviating rural overpopulation. It advocated, in the first instance, the migration of workers from impoverished rural districts to larger industrial towns where employment was available. While acknowledging that this measure might help in reducing the level of rural unemployment, he also conceded that “various causes [might] . . . prevent labour from flowing freely in every direction” (Thornton 1846, 10, 29–30, 286–90). He never considered this solution, however, as anything but a short-term remedy to the problem of chronic rural poverty. The reason was that “any durable results” would require an emigration program “on a gigantic scale,” the estimated cost of which would ultimately render “such a scheme . . . purely chimerical” (287). Among the likes of classical economists such as Robert Torrens, Nassau Senior, Edward Wakefield, and John McCulloch, both state-financed schemes of wholesale emigration and self-financing and self-supporting emigration schemes were looked upon with favor. Thornton, on the other hand, never specifically delineated the ambitious (presumably, government-sponsored) emigration program he had in mind. As the mid-Victorian era was notable for the vast number of individuals migrating in search of new employment, typically to urban centers in the United Kingdom, or alternatively to distant lands in search of new lives, this proposal would have been superfluous. In fact, never have so many Britons been on the move as was the case in the nineteenth century (Hoppen 1998, 522–27). As compared with the writings of the principal exponents of emigration and colonization schemes, Thornton’s views on emigration were short-lived, lacking as they did an important analytical dimension.

Another crucial element in the campaign to alleviate rural poverty was the extension of compulsory public education. Thornton (1846, 383)

brought home this fact by stressing the longer-term “advantages of education” as a means of achieving “social and moral regeneration.” Indeed, a defining feature of Thornton’s early economic work consisted of the repeated invocation of character and moral conduct, and their tendency to nurture public education. It is beyond the scope of this discussion to present a critical survey of the “idea of character” as an instrument of moral behavior and social control in Victorian political discourse (see Collini 1991, chap. 3, for further discussion). Instead, the focus remains the delineation of Thornton’s views on the importance of education as a causal agent in character formation. In calling attention to the “importance of mental culture in the formation of character,” Thornton hoped to demonstrate the effect of compulsory national education “as a powerful incentive to good conduct.” Moral and social developments, such as the voluntary decision to defer marriage, were to be expected in a society where public education was accessible to all. By changing their aspirations, it was hoped that the laboring classes would eventually alter their habits and raise their living standards, thus limiting “the progress of population.” In an illuminating passage, Thornton (1846, 372) admitted that “in the largest sense of the word, every one of the measures already recommended in these pages for the advancement of the labouring class, may be regarded as contributing to education; for it is only by its influence on the mind, that an accession of comfort can tend to dissuade people from premature marriages.”

In spite of stressing “the advantages of education . . . for social and moral regeneration,” Thornton freely admitted that, in the short term, implementation was “very apt to be over-rated” (383). He conceded the existence of situations wherein a temporary palliative, such as public relief, was preferable, particularly “when persons able to work” were “unable to procure employment” (284, 383). In Thornton’s day, the responsibility of rehabilitating the sections of society trapped in such situations of dire poverty was borne by the English Poor Law system. It was in view of these circumstances that Thornton resolved to make a thorough study of the history and practice of public relief in the British Isles and to evaluate its impact on a wide range of economic and social factors. Before turning to that discussion, however, it seems appropriate to point out that while Thornton upheld the view that Poor Law relief brought *temporary* relief to the rural distress, more *permanent* improvements in the economic and social conditions of the rural populace could be accomplished only by extensive reform of the land tenure system based upon small-scale

Continental agricultural practices rather than large-scale English methods of farming, a comprehensive discussion of which is reserved until a later section.⁷

2. Thornton on the Old Poor Laws

The English experience with the Poor Laws began in earnest during the reign of Elizabeth I; the Act of Elizabeth of 1601 followed numerous private, philanthropic, and self-help ventures as well as ecclesiastical schemes designed to aid the poor. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Poor Laws underwent a series of amendments. However, the responsibility for organizing and financing public relief remained with the local parish authorities, who exercised considerable discretion over the sort of relief people received. Be that as it may, there was a general understanding among the English poor that they could rely on the Poor Law guardians to provide some form of assistance in a number of well-defined situations, such as old age, widowhood, sickness, and disability, although coverage was far from universal.⁸ These supplements, which were often an important increment to earned income, were conveniently divided into two categories: “indoor relief,” which required recipients to enter a parish workhouse; and “outdoor relief,” which included wage subsidies, payments in kind, and public works schemes.⁹

According to Joseph Persky (1997, 182), “Classical economists from Adam Smith to John Stuart Mill approached the poor laws with an almost reflexive hostility.” While it is fair to say that the classical economists were generally antagonistic toward the principle of public assistance to the poor, the reality was that, driven by the fear of social unrest, nearly all classical economists advocated some form of remedial aid as a means to avert political and economic instability. Thornton was no exception. From the vantage point of the mid-1840s, Thornton had ample time to

7. “By continental standards,” observes Hoppen (1998, 17), “English farms were large.”

8. Blaug (1963, 156–57) has noted that before 1834, “Parliamentary legislation failed to produce a national Poor Law, and throughout this period there was only a casual connection between the statute books and the administrative practices of parish officers. The 15,000 parishes in England and Wales varied in area from thirty acres to thirty square miles, in population from a few dozen to tens of thousands, and in taxable capacity from a barren common to the built-up docks of the City of London.”

9. The supplement was proportionate to the ruling price of bread and the size of workers’ families. Furthermore, under the provisions of the new bread scale, increase in family income corresponded to increase in the number of children, with each child constituting an additional claim for support (see Blaug 1958b, 197; 1964, 229).

absorb the various amendments to the English Poor Laws as well as to reflect upon their economic and social impact.¹⁰ Applying the benefits of hindsight, he presented a detailed overview of the historical background underlying the emergence of public relief in England. In doing so, he displayed hostility toward legislation sanctioning relief for able-bodied paupers without the prerequisite of employment within a parish workhouse. The so-called Speenhamland system ratified in 1796 was a case in point.

The Speenhamland policy required the supplementing of the earned income of the “industrious poor” to ensure a “minimum standard” of living. As Thornton (1846, 219) narrates, the able-bodied “heads of families were assumed to be entitled to certain incomes, varying with the number of mouths they had to feed; and if anyone’s wages were unequal to the amount considered to be his due, the parish readily made up the deficiency.” A wage supplement based on the difference between a worker’s earned income and an established minimum-of-existence level ensured that *real income* remained unchanged in the presence of fluctuations in the price of wheat, the staple food item of the poor. However, the “old poor law,” as Thornton called it, had the effect of distorting economic incentives through its impact on labor market earnings, labor force participation, worker productivity, and output. Thornton summarized these interactions between economic (dis)incentives and work initiative as follows:

When idleness was so liberally rewarded, and when the poor might obtain a more comfortable subsistence from the parish than they could possibly earn by their own exertions, their desire for employment must have greatly abated. They had no inducement to compete with their neighbours, or to offer to work for lower wages than were commonly paid. If they could not obtain the usual wages, they had recourse at once to the parish; and all of the very numerous class that prefer ease to independence were glad of an excuse for doing so. (206)

10. In addition, Thornton briefly reviewed the administration of the Poor Laws in Scotland and Ireland. He approved of the operation of the Poor Law and the assessment of the poor rates in the Scottish Lowlands, but was concerned about the lack of provision in the Scottish Highlands, where “compulsory assessments have never been adopted” (Thornton 1846, 402–3). This led him to recommend “a thorough reform of poor-law administration” as a “first step towards a cure of Highland destitution” (407). He noted that the “recent establishment of the poor law” in Ireland had been “applied with success.” Significantly, he emphasized that the Irish Poor Law “can only relieve distress, and cannot cure poverty” (416).

A common argument among Poor Law critics in the period before 1834 was that the Speenhamland practice of supplementing the wages of able-bodied workers stifled worker effort, producing a fall in agricultural output, lower agricultural wages, and a rise in relief expenditures in practicing districts.¹¹ The old Poor Law system was said to resemble an unemployment insurance scheme. Residents of small local parishes had a good idea of the sort of relief assistance they might receive in a number of reasonably well-defined situations, and these perceptions could influence behavior even among those who did not in fact claim relief. A commonplace grievance in the early nineteenth century, as public opposition to the Poor Laws intensified, was that “English men and women . . . believed they had a right to relief” (Solar 1995, 6).

Thornton also displayed strong interest in the social consequences of the old Poor Laws. Specifically, he argued that the problem of rural overpopulation stemmed from the “prodigal liberality with which the poor were treated” under the old Poor Laws. The availability of allowances for families with three or more children had encouraged early marriage and family formation, particularly among rural paupers, which stimulated the growth of population.¹² The problem of rural overpopulation became acute under the Speenhamland system, wherein “profusion became the distinguishing characteristic of poor law administration, and offered direct encouragement to the marriages of the poor; and this was, probably, the sole cause of the excessive speed with which population

11. There is ample data providing evidence of rural overpopulation in Britain between 1795 and 1850; total relief expenditure rose in the period from 1795 to 1818, when it peaked. A five-year period of decline in expenditure followed, after which “the trend was upward once again” (Blaug 1963, 163). However, the data reveals little about the composition of relief expenditures (see Blaug 1963, 163, 172, for further discussion). For instance, it does not reveal the number of agricultural laborers entirely dependent upon parish funds nor the number that had their wages supplemented “permanently” or “occasionally” by Poor Law authorities. Nor does it indicate whether agricultural workers residing in districts located near the large industrial towns of Manchester and Liverpool, or in Lancashire and Leeds and Sheffield in Yorkshire, might have been able to migrate to find work after the harvest season or if the levels of professionalism in the administration of the system differed across jurisdictions. It suffers additionally from a lack of coverage on the possible decay of local cottage industries and its role in the reduced job availabilities in some areas. Another point worth noting concerns marked regional variations in the provision of relief for qualitatively similar laborers and whether relief expenditure varied widely as between Speenhamland and non-Speenhamland counties.

12. There is some evidence to support Thornton on this score. Blaug (1963, 173), for example, notes that “between 1780 and 1820, it was the rising birth rate which enlarged the size of families, and this was due in part to the Old Poor Law.”

proceeded from that date to the commencement of the wars of the French Revolution” (Thornton 1846, 244).¹³

Thornton drew a sharp distinction between the provision of assistance to those whose circumstances left them unable to fend for themselves and the provision of assistance that led to a change in the “moral conduct” of the laboring class. Thornton was prepared to accept a Poor Law regime embodying the principle of limited state action in support of those who were purely victims of circumstance. At the same time, however, he attempted to inculcate within the poor a reliance “on their own resources” and provided a framework of economic incentives that directed the social behavior and attitudes of the poor toward independence and self-reliance. He advised in particular that welfare reforms should destroy the incentive to early family formation to relieve population pressures, raise living standards, check the rise in poor relief expenditures, and reduce the burden on ratepayers, all of which prominently figured in the Speenhamland system:

Thenceforward a poor man might lay aside all thought for tomorrow, and solace himself with the belief, that whatever family he might bring around him, he should be maintained in the position which he actually occupied; nay, it might almost be said that a positive bounty was placed on procreation, for as the more children a man had, the more money he received, a large family might be regarded as a source of wealth. (Thornton 1846, 219–20)¹⁴

English critics of the Poor Law system, like Thornton, found most harmful that part of the system that provided for the outdoor relief of able-bodied persons. However, it would be misleading to suggest that Thornton disavowed the principle of public assistance per se. He referred disapprovingly to the “generosity and liberality” of the old Poor Laws, but he never supported their abolition. He believed that “a poor law of some sort” was “essential to the well-being of every community” (271). He further believed that in cases of destitution “arising from physical infirmity . . . there ought

13. Elsewhere, he wrote, “the impulse which population receives from poverty had consequently lost little, if any thing, of its force, and the encouragement afforded by the poor laws was likewise still as strong as ever” (Thornton 1846, 227–28).

14. Thornton’s criticism here might be overdone. As Blaug (1963, 161) argues, the Speenhamland scale was “so modest” that it “was hardly a temptation to marry and breed recklessly.” Williams (1981, 38–39) explained that “the weekly dole per pauper works out as just under one and a quarter shillings a week in an era when even an underpaid agricultural labourer could expect to earn the better part of ten shillings a week.”

to be a public provision, to which the sufferers may have access” (272). Nor should public assistance, he added, be limited exclusively to the aged, the sick and infirm, and the very young, but also to able-bodied workers who should be eligible for relief, as “a variety of cases, too, may deprive [them] of their accustomed occupation” (272). Overall, the conclusion was that “a poor law of some sort is essential to the well-being of every community” (271). However, the conditions covering eligibility needed to be carefully circumscribed in order to prevent abuses of the system: “If it [poor relief] be granted to the able-bodied, unless very sparingly, or coupled with very stringent conditions, it fosters idleness and discourages independent industry” (272).

Public disenchantment with the existing system of poor relief intensified during the early nineteenth century. These shifts in public attitudes were driven by overwhelming support in favor of reforming a system that paid able-bodied workers a guaranteed subsidy, inadvertently encouraging the drastic reduction in agricultural wages, as it was taken for granted that parish authorities would provide a supplement to those in need of it. The status quo was finally broken with the passage of the Poor Laws Amendment Acts of 1834. The so-called New Poor Laws were based upon the recommendations contained in a report prepared by the Royal Commission of Inquiry established to investigate and recommend changes to the English Poor Laws.¹⁵ While the welfare reforms gave the impression that a better balance had been struck between poor relief and economic incentives, the reality was very different: the New Poor Laws, while marking “a revolution in British social administration,” essentially left the structure of public relief substantially unchanged (see Blaug 1958b, 201–2, for further comment).

3. Thornton on the New Poor Laws

Thornton was genuinely pleased with the advent of the New Poor Laws, focused as they were on centralizing the structure and administration of public relief, making access to public relief more stringent by strengthening eligibility criteria, and prohibiting outdoor relief for able-bodied

15. The commission’s report, authored by two leading advocates of Poor Law reform, Nassau Senior and Edwin Chadwick, has been described as a “brilliant, influential, and wildly unhistorical document” which has “seriously distorted the history of the Industrial Revolution in Britain” (Blaug 1963, 152).

persons.¹⁶ The “change produced by its introduction,” he pronounced triumphantly, “was almost magical” (Thornton 1846, 230–31). Thornton’s analysis weighed up the advantages and disadvantages of indoor and outdoor relief as follows:

Besides being a ready and effectual mode of testing want, [indoor relief] offers the cheapest means of relieving it, and admits of a greater portion of relief being afforded with safety. When paupers are allowed to remain at home, it is often difficult to ascertain whether their distress is real or feigned; the cost of maintaining them is greater than it would be in a large establishment, where the most methodical arrangements could be practised; and, as no restraints can be imposed on their personal liberty, the only means of making them dissatisfied with their dependent condition is to abridge the assistance afforded to them. (273–74)

By restricting public aid and confining it to the rigors of the poorhouse, the New Poor Law, he argued, would help to restore work incentives, discourage early family formation among the poor, and reduce their welfare dependence. He noted further that the central objective of the new legislation was to force the pauper into a state of “less eligibility” by “making the situation of the dependent pauper less desirable than that of the independent labourer” (272). The principal means of achieving this outcome lay in “the refusal of parochial relief to the able-bodied elsewhere than within the walls of a workhouse” (230). Such able-bodied workers must “either submit to the confinement and discipline of the workhouse,” he opined, “or earn a livelihood by their own labour” (231). Thornton remained committed to indoor relief, as this ensured that “relief should not much exceed what is strictly necessary” (285, 286). The most obvious advantage, in his estimate, of the New Poor Law was “the comparative cheapness with which . . . inmates may be maintained” upon entering the parish workhouse (283). Each relief recipient was means tested, a process which would be simplified by residence in a workhouse. In addition, the bulk purchase of goods and services such as food, clothing, and health care for those in the workhouse could also generate significant cost savings.

16. The New Poor Law, as Blaug (1958b, 201) has correctly observed, “never succeeded in abolishing outdoor relief to the able-bodied, particularly in the industrial centres of the North [of England].” There is no evidence to suggest that Thornton ever visited a workhouse. His writings on the alleged successes of indoor relief seem to be wholly derived from government-commissioned reports and the observations of like-minded social reformers.

Two or three hundred persons, living together, may be supplied abundantly with every requisite for a sum which, if they were separated, would scarcely keep them alive. With the most skilful management, the expenditure on account of the poor must be very large, but certainly no means should be neglected of keeping it as low as may be consistent with the perfect attainment of its legitimate objects. (283)

A number of other benefits could be accrued by the pauper upon entering a parish workhouse. In the first place, he could expect to be “well lodged, clothed, and fed.” Indeed, as Thornton elaborated, “more abundant diet and greater accommodation of the workhouse are offered to all who need them” (279, 283). The argument that indoor relief would eventually repair nutritional deficiencies is an interesting facet of the general support for the new system. In terms of the economy as a whole, the improved diet of the worker would, ultimately, translate into higher labor productivity and earnings.

According to Thornton, the work performed in the parish poorhouse was “not worse than work elsewhere, and is often better remunerated.” Moreover, he claimed that “agricultural labourers live much better in the workhouse than they do in their own homes” (276). Nevertheless, the living conditions of the workhouse, particularly for the able-bodied, “should undoubtedly be made sufficiently irksome to make them impatient to get out of it” (282). As Thornton maintained, “relief should not much exceed what is strictly necessary” in order to “avoid giving direct encouragement to improvidence”; to “improve the condition of the able-bodied,” it was important to establish a framework of economic incentives that threw “them entirely on their own resources, but at the same time to augment those resources to the utmost” (285, 282–83, 286).

Some critics attacked the principle of indoor relief as responsible for “the demoralization of the industrious classes,” while others argued that the workhouse was little more than “a prison designed for the punishment of poverty” (278–79). Thornton, though apparently sympathetic to these views, refused to completely accept the former, while simultaneously refuting the latter with the argument that “residence in the workhouse would be much more anxiously desiderated than it is now eschewed.” Despite being well aware that only a small fraction of the total number of relief applicants entered the workhouse due to a shortage of workhouses in Britain (see Hopen 1998, 98), he believed nevertheless that the “workhouse should be the only certain dependence in distress” for the majority of relief applicants. For the remainder, he outlined an alternative line of action:

From the operation of this rule, entire families, capable in ordinary times of supporting themselves, but whose means of livelihood were temporarily curtailed or withdrawn, might very properly be exempted. A little assistance afforded to these at their own homes, might enable them to struggle through their temporary difficulties, and to regain in a short time their independence. (Thornton 1846, 281)

He continued, “The discipline of the workhouse, so far as regarded the old or very young, might probably be somewhat relaxed without any bad consequences” (281). This view was fueled partly by Thornton’s desire to avert any further erosion of the traditional family unit. He conceded that there had been cases of families who, “by taking up [their] abode in a workhouse,” had subsequently experienced difficulty in “regaining an independent position.” But these, he added, were “still only exceptions” (278). In response to criticism that “the separation of the sexes” in the workhouse was “inhuman and unnatural,” he offered the astonishing retort that “the separation which takes place [between husband and wife] in the workhouse is a spontaneous arrangement” and “no one will dispute that they have a right to part of their own accord” (277). Thus indoor relief should not be disparaged as an “invasion of their just privileges” because no “compulsion is used” (278). In any event, Thornton felt that the positive features of the workhouse system outweighed the loss of privacy, namely, being required “to observe regular hours, to practise habits of cleanliness, and to perform stated tasks when able to work” (276, 277). In the end, the New Poor Law proved inflexible and required modifications that made the adoption of an exclusively indoor system of relief impracticable.

Another notable aspect of Thornton’s *Over-population and Its Remedy* is the discussion of the economic predicament of the English factory workers with reference to the rapid industrialization of industry. This discussion has been heralded as a vast improvement in the quality of economic and social policy pronouncements made by classical economists in the first half of the nineteenth century.

4. Thornton on the Factory Acts

Over-population and Its Remedy examines the economic conditions faced by British workers and suggests ways of relieving the distress and poverty of the urban disenfranchised. Despite the fact that Thornton’s analysis of the Factory Acts was based on textual exegesis as opposed to

first-hand evidence, its foundations rest firmly upon two distinct lines of thought. The first, common to the majority of classical economists, was motivated primarily by the humanitarian need to regulate the working conditions of women and children. The second, based as it was on economic considerations, encompassed such issues as the impact of factory reform on labor productivity, wages, and output. At midcentury, this highly innovative and controversial argument failed to achieve the prominence and recognition it deserved from political economists.

It is against the backdrop of the original factory legislation proposed in 1819 by Sir Robert Peel that a better appreciation of Thornton's analysis can be derived. The *raison d'être* of Peel's version lay in the desire to restrict the working hours of children below sixteen years of age. The standard working time Peel proposed for this group was twelve hours, while the employment of children under the age of nine was prohibited altogether. The factory legislation, despite a series of minor amendments in the 1820s and 1830s, succeeded in eliciting only a tepid response from the classical economists of the day; few pamphlets or tracts were published on its economic and social consequences, a situation that signifies the degree of disinterest about it among classical economists (Walker 1941, 170–71).

The views of the classical economists on the Factory Acts in the first half of the nineteenth century have been examined in several important studies (Walker 1941; Sorenson 1952; Blaug 1958a). Of the few classical economists who expressed interest in the factory controversy of the day, the overwhelming majority supported the principle of legislation to protect children from the harsh and unsanitary conditions of the factory system (see Hoppen 1998, 96–97). In short, classical writers recommended factory legislation on humanitarian grounds (141). They believed in regulating the working conditions of young people until the proper age of consent; opinions differed only in *what* constituted the proper age of consent and in the role of parents as “natural protectors” of their children. Reflecting upon the Factory Acts of 1833 and 1844, John McCulloch, one of the most orthodox classical economists, said that he was inclined

to approve of the policy of the Act which limits and restricts the labour of young people in factories. It is right that the state should interfere to protect those who are unable to protect themselves. And in emancipating them from the slavery in which they were frequently involved through the selfish and vicious conduct of their parents, we are really

contributing to improve the habits and condition of the latter. (quoted in Sorenson 1952, 258–59)¹⁷

Yet many of the very same economists who approved the principle of protecting children were also hostile to the factory regulation that undermined the principle of “free labour,” thus infringing upon their concept of “freedom of contract,” despite *that* argument having lost much of its potency by the mid-1830s (Walker 1941, 177).¹⁸ The underlying motive lay in preventing interference with the free employment of adult labor; a reduction in the working day for adult workers would lead to subsequent loss of production and reduced money wages. This refrain continued to be put forward in the factory reform debates in the period up to the 1840s. Mark Blaug (1958a, 212) put it vividly when he wrote: “Although the classical economists supported the *principle* of granting protection to children, they were aware that the unavoidable consequence was a shorter working day for adult operatives; rather than to countenance that they preferred to dispense with the benefits of regulated child labour.”

This was the main objection classical economists made to Lord Ashley’s motion of the Ten Hours Bill, proposing a limit on the working hours of women and children.¹⁹ As Blaug (1958a, 223–25) argues, the majority of the classical economists who wrote on the issue of factory reform should not be considered as ardent supporters of the Factory Acts, because they appeared unwilling to approve legislation reducing the working hours of adult labor. For some leading classical economists, such as John Stuart Mill and Henry Fawcett, the issue of factory reform was further complicated by their association with the women’s suffrage movement: “They feared that the Ten Hours Bill would encourage the substitution of unprotected adult males for protected female workers. Since the emancipation of women was held to be dependent upon unlimited access to factory employment, they thought it necessary to condemn the Factory Acts in so far as these involved restrictions upon the hours of women workers” (Blaug 1958a, 224). Most classical economists at midcentury

17. Sorenson (1952, 249–54), interestingly enough, interpreted Robert Torrens as having supported the Factory Acts, including Lord Ashley’s Ten Hours Bill. See Blaug 1958a, 218–19, for an alternative view of Torrens’s part in the factory reform controversy.

18. Walker (1941, 172) writes that “reputable and orthodox economists like Colonel Robert Torrens, Joseph Hume, Thomas Tooke, Edwin Chadwick, and Leonard Horner, were all favorable to factory legislation as long as it was limited to children.”

19. The passage of the bill, known as Althorp’s Act, in 1847, “limited the working day of persons between thirteen and eighteen to twelve hours a day and of those between nine and thirteen to nine hours a day” (Blaug 1958a, 213).

supported limiting the working hours of young people, but very few gave unqualified encouragement to factory reform. Thornton (1846, 399), however, was an important exception, in that he not only supported Lord Ashley's plan to restrict the working hours of women and children to ten a day, but showed a willingness to endorse a wider program of factory reform "still bolder" than that advanced by Ashley.

As already mentioned, Thornton's views on the issue of factory reform were primarily motivated by the desire "to relieve women and young persons from the obligations of excessive labour" (395). In his estimate, about one quarter of all those working in "textile manufactures" in Britain were females "under sixteen years of age," and they "commonly work for twelve hours out of the twenty four, at occupations requiring for the most part a good deal of bodily exertion" (395–96).

The treatment of child labor within the factory system was a particularly serious problem because of the lack of effective parental supervision in the factory environment. Young children could not become responsible, disciplined, and sober adults if they were "not only excessively overtaken, but ill fed, and otherwise cruelly treated." "From such discipline," Thornton opined, "only the worst consequences can proceed. The children who survive it grow up more brutal, if possible, than their oppressors" (396). He continued, "These evils cannot perhaps be corrected, except by legislative interference" (396). It should be emphasized that Thornton nearly always sanctioned government legislation promoting community welfare, as when he supported the public provision of hygienic drainage and sanitation systems in both rural and urban areas (384, 396).

By the mid-1840s, considerable debate had taken place on the plan proposed by Lord Ashley to limit the daily working hours of women and children to ten. Some classical economists were, as previously discussed, opposed to legislation impeding the inalienable right of individuals to decide the number of hours they should work each day. However, Thornton referred approvingly to Ashley's proposal; he took the view that "the adoption of Lord Ashley's plan, or even of one still bolder, would be an experiment of little hazard, which, if successful, would . . . contribute more than any other single means to the welfare of the labouring population of large towns" (399).

Unfortunately, Thornton never outlined the "still bolder" plan he had in mind. Nevertheless, it seems reasonable to suppose that it included the "expediency of resorting to compulsion" to further restrict the working hours of women and children in the factory system. The motive for the

view lay in the desire to arrest the breakdown of the traditional family unit. It was “shocking,” he remarked, “that children should be deprived, almost from their birth, of a mother’s care” and that “women should abjure the duties and gentleness of their sex, and be distinguishable chiefly by their greater coarseness and shamelessness” (397). These patriarchal views were, as will presently be revealed, intrinsically bound to a sentimental vision of a distinctive English patriarchal family built around strong community ties.

Another important aspect of factory reform Thornton addressed concerned the decline predicted in labor earnings and output if the working hours of British factory workers were reduced to ten. He concluded that the Ten Hours Bill would not necessarily check production or reduce wages. Although he did not refer explicitly to the contributions of other classical writers, the writings of Nassau Senior and Robert Torrens, both of whom had already published influential tracts on the economic impact of the reform of the factory system, almost certainly shaped his line of thought.

Briefly, Senior published in 1837 his *Letters on the Factory Acts*, a document that inaugurated certain key ideas that eventually “became an essential feature of the classical analysis of factory legislation” (Blaug 1958a, 217; see Blaug 1958a, 216–17, for further comment). In his work, Senior argued that the reduction of work hours and the corresponding fall in output would spell the ruin of British textile manufactures. This argument was made on the grounds that the profit margins of the textile manufacturer would decline, as it was in the work of the last hour of the day that the profits of the manufacturers were made (see Sorenson 1952, 259–61, for further comment). Thornton refused to accept Senior’s implicit assumption that output per man-hour was constant, although it was accepted by most economists of the day. Robert Torrens, in his *Letter to Lord Ashley* (1844), struck a familiar cord in outlining his case against the Ten Hours Bill when concluding that the legislation would also check output and reduce wages: “Enact your Ten Hours Bill and one of two events must inevitably ensue: —the manufactures of England will be transferred to foreign lands, or else the operatives must submit to a reduction of wages to the extent of 25 percent” (quoted in Blaug 1958a, 218).

Here, Thornton (1846, 398) presented a new argument. He admitted, in the first instance, that if “the daily labour of British operatives were shortened,” it was “very possible that their [nominal] wages would fall.” However, he added, once the Corn Laws had been repealed, lower food

prices might leave real wages unchanged, or even raise them, despite the fall in nominal wages owing to the Ten Hours Bill.

A fall of wages would be of no consequence if the price of provisions and other necessaries fell at the same time, so as to enable the operative, notwithstanding the decrease of his earnings, to purchase as much as before of every article required. It has been shown that free trade would reduce the prices one-third. Suppose then that wages should fall one quarter, the operative would, notwithstanding, be really better off than before. (398)

He refused to accept the argument, moreover, that it necessarily followed that production must fall in the event of a decline in working hours.²⁰

It is not quite certain, that a diminution of produce would result from shortening the duration of labour. Persons who are not obliged to work so long, may work harder than before, and may get through the same quantity of work in a short time as formerly occupied them for a longer period. . . . If so, the limitation of labour to ten hours daily would not in any circumstances reduce wages, and at all events the reduction might be either prevented or neutralised by the establishment of free trade in food. (399)

Thornton's analysis implied that hourly output per worker would rise with each reduction of the working day, a view that ran against orthodox classical thought (see Blaug 1958a, 225). Thus, he claimed, the Ten Hours Bill did not necessarily spell the end of British industry; rather, there was a possibility of increasing overall output as well as the prospect for material improvements in standards of living. "Unhappily," says Blaug (1958a, 219), the merits of Thornton's carefully stated analysis "made no impression on his contemporaries."²¹

Overall, Thornton's analysis of the economic and social impact of factory legislation contained some differences as well as similarities to

20. There is some evidence to support the argument that production falls when work hours decline (see Blaug 1958a, 221–22, for further discussion).

21. Robert Torrens and John McCulloch, two leading classical economists of the day, were opposed to the Ten Hours Bill on the grounds that it would check production and diminish wages (see Blaug 1958a, 218–20, for further comment). Some years later, Alfred Marshall, the doyen of Cambridge economists, "rediscovered" Thornton's neglected argument concerning the possible productivity effects of a shorter working day (see Marshall 1920, 695–96; and Blaug 1958a, 222 n. 6).

classical analyses. The majority of classical economists agreed that some form of factory legislation protecting the interests of children was crucial. Thornton agreed that minors should be protected by law, but differed from other classical writers in his views concerning the economic impact of such legislation. The prevailing view was that further measures to restrict work hours would lead to a decrease in production, money wages, and profits. In contrast, Thornton, whose analysis went largely unnoticed by his contemporaries, maintained that factory legislation might be extended without any such accompanying loss.

5. Thornton on the Irish Land Question

The Irish land question was one of the issues dominating Victorian public life. The calamitous failure of the Irish potato crop in the 1840s triggered an epidemic of poverty and famine. The calamity was reported at length in the Victorian newspapers and consumed a lot of parliamentary time, with debates over the appropriate course of action. There was mounting pressure demanding an overhaul of the land tenure system in the hope of preventing repeat occurrences of the sort. The issues involved were complex and highly contentious. Few critics found common ground on the best way to proceed with the reform of Ireland's land tenure system. Some critics agitated for the introduction of large-scale English farming, while others advanced reforms promoting small-scale farming; there was little agreement concerning the precise form of the measures (see Black 1960, 28–44, for further discussion).

R. D. Collison Black (1960, 28–32) has ably demonstrated that the proposals Thornton advanced at this time were strikingly at variance with orthodox classical ideas on the subject of Irish land tenure reform. The “orthodox view” held that small-scale cultivation “was hopelessly inefficient and unproductive by comparison with large farms.” To this end, leading classical economists Robert Torrens and Nassau Senior vociferously agitated for “the improvement of the condition of the existing population through emigration, consolidation of holdings and the introduction of new capital.” In stark relief, a smaller though no less vocal group of individuals called for more radical action on the land question. William Thornton was foremost among them, not least because he was one of the first writers in England to defend, based on social, moral, *and* economic grounds, the rights of the small tenant farmer to own the land he tilled. Harnessing an array of arguments favoring small farms, particularly those

under peasant proprietorship, Thornton drew on new writings published by Samuel Laing and H. D. Inglis, providing compelling evidence of (comparatively) higher productivity among small land holders in continental Europe. This new evidence ultimately convinced economists such as G. Poulett Scrope and John Stuart Mill of the feasibility of adopting a small farm system in Ireland like that in continental Europe. While details of the peasant proprietorship system differ from one writer to another, there seems to be a general consensus among these writers concerning the small tenant's right to own and occupy land. Not surprisingly, these proposals attracted considerable criticism from orthodox adherents of the view that the consolidation of holdings, together with emigration, provided the only viable solution to the predicament of the impoverished agricultural laborer. Nassau Senior (1849, 262–63), while generally in favor of the principle of owner occupation, held nevertheless that the implementation of the scheme adumbrated by Thornton and Mill was not feasible in Ireland precisely due to the considerably greater cost of resettling pauper families on wastelands as compared to that of assisting them to emigrate (see Black 1960, 32, for further comment).

In *Over-population and Its Remedy* (1846) and *A Plea for Peasant Proprietors* (1848), Thornton considers land tenure reform as the most definitive means of tackling the allied problems of overpopulation and rural poverty. Thornton's resolute faith in land tenure reform stemmed from his belief that its implementation would pave the way to an overall alleviation of the related problems of overpopulation and poverty in rural Britain. He held that the decline in employment opportunities in agriculture and other areas was responsible for the increasing numbers of landless rural laborers. Other factors that he alleged contributed to the malaise were the new capital-intensive methods of husbandry, social dislocation arising from the enclosure of common land, and the inherent generosity of statutory poor relief that distorted economic incentives, all of which led to, in his belief, "rural pauperism." Central to its resolution was the implementation of an ambitious program of agrarian reform striking a better social balance between the landlords and tenants and between economic incentives and poor relief.

Thornton commenced his investigation by establishing an historical reference point from which to evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of various forms of agricultural tenantry. Drawing on pastoral traditions dating back to the Middle Ages, Thornton (1846, 123, 194, 350) described "a golden era" in which people lived harmoniously in rural felicity. These

pastoral communities were dominated by the “noble yeomanry,” celebrated as “the honour and strength of England.” Thornton evoked a picturesque social landscape in which the “industrious” and “independent” yeoman and his dependent family were made the basis of the nation—the fundamental social unit and the origination point of moral reformation. The importance attached by Thornton to the concept of the independent proprietor continued a great Victorian tradition of idealizing the Middle Ages. The patent utopianism of this vision was based upon pastoral communities that rarely experienced misery, poverty, crime, or overpopulation, a sentiment Thornton conveyed when he wrote that “overpopulation [is] an evil unknown to pastoral economies.” The yeoman became a reassuring, nationalist symbol of duty, social stability, and hierarchy. This “state of tranquillity,” however, was not to last.

In the sixteenth century, the quality of rural life began deteriorating. This decline Thornton attributed to the gradual consolidation of small farms into large agricultural estates. The emergence of large-scale farming had, in turn, contributed directly to the inevitable “breaking up and destruction of the noble yeomanry” (193). This loss, he underlined, was reinforced in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries by the passage of parliamentary acts legalizing “the inclosure and partition of common land” (210), a situation once colorfully described as a “plain enough case of class robbery” (see Moselle 1995, 482).²² These statutes brought “a vast extent of territory . . . under cultivation,” leading Thornton (1846, 211) to declare, “The agricultural labourer has been deprived of the right of pasture, and with it of one of his chief sources of wealth.” The “noble yeomanry,” he lamented, “were being degraded into common day labourers and mendicants” (194). Thornton’s disdain for the abuses of aristocratic power and the accumulation of undeserved wealth was magnified by the realities of the immiserating effects of the enclosure movement. His sympathies were always with workers, the poor, and the otherwise disenfranchised. Thornton’s disenchantment with the uneven structure of the agricultural economy led him to evaluate several alternative schemes establishing small-scale farming as “favourable instead of injurious to agriculture” (332).

Thornton drew on late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century discussions recommending the expansion of the cottage allotment system

22. The so-called enclosure movement reached “its climax in the sixty years of intense parliamentary activity after 1760” (McCloskey 1972, 15–16).

that allowed for the distribution of small parcels of arable land among agricultural laborers. The system was, in his opinion, one of the few viable employment alternatives available to landless wage laborers. His means of justifying the motives underlying this proposal were numerous. The first required the gradual restoration of communal values inherent in institutions of common property rights that had been eroded over time by the consolidation of small farms into large-scale agricultural estates by acquisitive landlords (see Hoppen 1998, 28). Yet for Thornton, cottage allotments seemed to resolve problems beyond the immediate consequences of enclosure and loss of common rights. It was now feasible for the farmer and his family to be engaged in producing potatoes and other vegetables for most of the year, effectively reducing the need for parochial dependence and poor relief. Indeed, there was growing awareness of the allotment system as encouraging self-reliance and resourcefulness. “The possession of a small piece of ground,” opined Thornton (1846, 340–41), “gives a feeling of independence to a poor man that he cannot otherwise experience.”²³ However, “an accession of comfort,” he added, “is only one of many advantages which the possession of an allotment affords”:

Its moral effects are not less important. It gives the labourer a feeling of independence and self-respect, and at the same time the strongest incentives to diligence. It makes him prudent and thrifty, and assists him in instilling similar habits into his children, and in training them for the particular calling for which they are destined. Thus, while it raises the labourer’s social position, it endows him with the very qualities most requisite to keep him in his new station. (347)

Cottage allotments were viewed by Thornton as a viable solution to the problem of rural poverty. The key to this solution he located in the laborer’s capacity to alter completely both work and moral practices in response to economic incentives. This stimulus to action could be accomplished only if the laborer enjoyed security of land tenure as well as the right to retain a fair share of the produce of the land. The implementation of the allotment system would, in time, raise aspirations; an allotment endowed its owner with both respectability and social status. The reasoning that allotment holders would “seldom sacrifice these advantages” once they began enjoying the status of “a contented, upright, and useful member of

23. The word *independence* was employed as meaning freedom from poor relief, which would, in Thornton’s mind, promote the development of the laborer’s self-reliance.

society” subsequently formed the basis of the plan for rejuvenating Ireland’s agrarian economy (342, 348).²⁴

Thornton’s best known contribution to the subject of land tenure reform was his proposal for the resettlement of Irish pauper families as peasant proprietors on reclaimed wastelands (see Black 1960, 30–32). The plan further attempted to achieve the introduction of fixed rents for Irish cottiers, and, ultimately, security of tenure. He painted a particularly grim picture of rural Ireland, where a large proportion of the cottar population lived in a “deplorable” state. Their “debasement and misery,” he wrote, “are at once the wonder and scandal of the age” (Thornton 1848, 4). Following an exhaustive study of the social *and* moral effects of peasant proprietorship in several European countries as well as the Channel Islands, Thornton arrived at the conclusion that an agrarian model native to Ulster could be successfully modified for implementation in the rest of Ireland: “The beneficial effect which will result from its extension,” he noted, “will scarcely be denied by an advocate of peasant proprietorship” (215).

Successfully implementing these grandiose plans, however, required the existence of an agricultural economy based on a secure system of private property rights. These, it was hoped, would neutralize the acquisitive behavior of predatory landowners. It was imperative, noted Thornton, for peasant proprietors to “possess a proprietary right which limits that of the landlord, and restrains his power of raising rent, or ejecting the actual occupant” (202). In the event of the “power of the nobles” forming an obstacle to the implementation of the plan, Thornton envisaged a situation where “the actual occupiers of the soil, far from being landowners, are not even leaseholders, but are rackrented tenants at will,” constantly at the mercy of the rapacious landowner (187).²⁵

In Thornton’s estimate, 950,000 agricultural families resided in Ireland at the time. Of these, he claimed, “about 750,000 might obtain a competent

24. On 3 February 1848, at a meeting of the Political Economy Club, Thornton proposed the following question on cottage allotments: “Is the system of letting small pieces of land to agricultural labourers, commonly called the allotment system, open to any valid objection, as a means of improving the condition of the labourers?” (quoted in Mirowski and Tradewell 1999, 34).

25. A tenant-at-will could, at the landlord’s whim, be removed from occupied land, either by the farmer or landlord, because security of land tenure was not enforced. A “rack rent” was paid by the tenant to the farmer or landlord for the use of farmland. This was above the “fair rent” paid by the farmers themselves to landlords. The imposition of rack rents was widely regarded as immoral (see Moselle 1995, 497).

livelihood from the land actually under cultivation” (216). The remaining 200,000 families constituted, in his words, “a redundant population” requiring “adequate employment,” though “not on the land already under cultivation” (216–17). What was to be done with them? The resolution lay in transferring them “to the waste lands,” a plan that served to attract heavy criticism centering on the prohibitive costs involved. The estimated total cost of £24,000,000 covered the costs of maintaining “two hundred thousand families for many months, to purchase land for their occupation, and to supply them with materials for building, and with farming implements and stock” (219).²⁶ The scale of the proposed project would dwarf comparable reclamation schemes successfully undertaken “by private persons” in the “maritime provinces of Belgium” and parts of Ireland (227–30, 252).²⁷ However, there “would be little cause to regret the outlay,” as the expected gain from this “great social experiment” entailed the “profitable employment” of the 200,000 families “in draining and sub-soiling the wastes selected for reclamation” (218). Working with spade and hoe, the peasant proprietor who came to live on this reclaimed land would be able to grow potatoes and other crops, tend an orchard, pay a “very moderate rent,” possibly supply local markets, eventually repaying the loan with interest. At this point, however, the plan deviated from the realm of economic calculation into moral and social considerations.

Tenant farmers were required to sign a lease containing certain conditional clauses (221).²⁸ While some of the clauses were commonplace, such

26. Thornton (1848, 214, 216) estimated that “eight acres are quite enough to enable a tenant family, paying a fair rent, to obtain a competent maintenance” and recommended that those farms larger than eight acres be consolidated and “redistributed into . . . farms of eight acres.”

27. The argument Thornton (1848, 199, 203, 214, 224, 231–32, 235, 237–38) presents as support for his interpretation of Ireland’s recent agricultural history is derived largely from the important, albeit somewhat outdated, work by Arthur Young (1741–1820). Young amassed a wealth of information pertaining to Ireland’s rural conditions in 1776, which he discovered during the course of his tour of that country. He published the celebrated *A Tour in Ireland* in 1780. As to the source of his own estimates (concerning either the number of Irish families needing relief or the cost of the extensive social program envisioned), Thornton (1848, 213, 221–23, 238–39, 241) drew heavily upon data contained in three important contemporary statistical reports: Captain John Pitt Kennedy’s *Digest of Evidence Taken before Her Majesty’s Commissioners of Inquiry into the State of Law and Practice in Respect to the Occupation of Land in Ireland*, published in 1847; Lord John Russell’s speech on the state of Ireland, delivered on 25 January 1847; and Sir George Nicholls’s *Poor Laws—Ireland: Three Reports*, published in 1838.

28. Thornton used the term *honesty* to mean the sense of pride in and respect for the institution of private property a landholder derived from his occupancy of the land (see Thornton 1848, 167–68).

as the terms of the lease and the amount of rent to be paid, other conditions served as important control functions aimed at raising “the social condition of the people.” Thornton noted, for example, that “one object of every scheme” as well as “one sign of its success, must be the adoption of better kinds of food by the labouring classes” (232). Another clause stipulated that the land must be cultivated by spade and not by horse. “The head of such a family,” said Thornton, “would not be able to procure either a horse or a plough, and would be obliged to use a spade” (233). His capacity is essentially a function of the energy at his command. The motive was both practical and moral: few laborers were in a position to adopt equine pursuits; more importantly, spade husbandry inculcated the celebrated virtues of industriousness and sobriety, leaving little leisure time to pursue immoral activities (see Archer 1997, 28, for further discussion). Other conditions stipulated that the land was expected to be “brought into cultivation within a specified time,” while the lease was framed to permit tenant farmers to enjoy “permanence of their tenure,” a situation made “contingent on their behaviour.” Potential breaches of these conditions were prevented by a proposal stating the following: “The whole number of colonies might be arranged in districts, to each of which should be appointed a scientific agriculturalist, whose duty it would be to visit periodically every farm placed under his superintendence, and to instruct the owner in the principles of husbandry” (Thornton 1848, 240).

In advocating peasant proprietorship as an instrument of agrarian reform, Thornton made several references to the concept of “independence,” a virtue that connoted moral qualities that encouraged the support of self and dependents. Cottager families could be expected to lead simple, wholesome, and affectionate lives conforming to certain subjective standards of industriousness, self-sufficiency, and responsibility. Their daily routine was to be strictly regimented, involving physical work as a means to instil the celebrated twin virtues of honesty and sobriety. “Every householder” would be required, added Thornton, “by the conditions of his tenure to send his children, between certain ages, to attend lessons” in husbandry (242). Once again the motive lay in encouraging self-reliance, rewarding hard work, and eradicating “vicious habits, inherited from a long line of ancestors” (241). A well-ordered family life, attention to neatness and cleanliness, and general domestic concerns were seen as a bulwark against poverty. Sunday was reserved as a day of rest from physical exertion but not from spiritual and moral uplift: “The spiritual instruction of the community might be provided for,” noted Thornton, in weekly

church attendance (242). “With these precautions,” he announced, “there can be little doubt that the experiment would succeed” (243). “Thus,” he says in summary, “in the colonization of the waste lands is offered a means of speedily raising the most destitute portion of the Irish people to independence and comfort, and of permanently securing those blessings to their descendants” (250).

Despite his appeals to tradition, history, harmony, and the virtues of manual labor, Thornton remained a steadfast supporter of a landholding scheme elevating agricultural improvement and humanitarianism to new heights as twin engines of economic progress. His participation in the public debates on the elimination of poverty and unemployment, reduction of social tension and crime, and corresponding promotion of moral improvement, paved the way in establishing his public role as a social reformer and moral improver as well as a significant voice on the subject of land tenure reform. Another outlet utilized by Thornton in expressing his idealization of the independent proprietor lay in his poetical forays in the 1850s into popular verse. This facet of his literary enterprise is explored in the following section, which also seeks to explore his astuteness in disseminating his scholarly works.

6. “Compliments to Mr. Thornton”: Literary Overtures

Quite early in his authorial career, Thornton established the practice of forwarding his work to leading intellectual and political figures of the day who he thought would be in a position to carry out or influence public policy reform. In one instance, he sent his work *Over-population and Its Remedy* to Richard Cobden, a founding member of the Anti-Corn Law League, who emphatically conveyed his support for Thornton’s views (on the removal of all unnecessary barriers to free trade) in a hastily penned courtesy note thanking him “for the valuable work on over-population which he [had] been good enough to send.”²⁹ Thornton had also forwarded his first publication to the conservative politician Benjamin Disraeli, whose innate Tory radicalism would almost certainly have appealed to Thornton. This connection is evidenced by a handwritten courtesy note from Disraeli dated 6 April 1848, in which he “presents his compliments to

29. Thornton would, in turn, have fully endorsed Cobden’s views favoring the abolishment of primogeniture and entail.

Mr. Thornton” for having sent him “the copy of his interesting work on Population.”

The celebrated Leslie Stephen (1886, 197), who met Thornton in Stephen’s “radical” Cambridge days in the late 1850s and early 1860s, noted with wry amusement that Thornton, while generally “quite ignorant” of agriculture, contrived nevertheless to write an authoritative treatise on the subject of peasant proprietorship, largely through the application of industrious research. It was Stephen (1900, 3:187–94) who noted some years later that the “excellent W. T. Thornton” had published “the standard treatise” on peasant proprietorship, which presumed to forcibly attack “the assumptions then prevalent among English agriculturalists,” despite Thornton’s lack of “first-hand knowledge of agriculture.”³⁰ In a similar vein, Sir Charles Gavan Duffy (1898, 2:17), in a biographical memoir, reminisced: “Mr Thornton . . . had written successfully on Peasant Proprietary.”³¹

Thornton’s legitimacy was furthered by his ideas gaining acceptance from John Stuart Mill, the leading public intellectual of the day. The latter made good use of Thornton’s *Over-population and Its Remedy* in a long series of *Morning Chronicle* articles on the Irish question, a subject that awakened Mill’s Victorian social conscience. Mill viewed Thornton’s wastelands resettlement plan as “excellent.”³² Having quoted extensively from Thornton’s book in one article, Mill (1986, 24:898–99) evaluated it as follows:

This passage is from the work of Mr William Thornton, *Over-population and its Remedy*; a book honourably distinguished from most others of recent date, by the union of philanthropic feelings with sound knowledge and good sense. We recommend the whole work, and particularly its opinions and recommendations on Irish affairs, to the consideration of those who have any power over the critical turning point in the destinies of that ill-treated country.

30. Be that as it may, Stephen (1900, 3:188) correctly observed that Thornton “could refer to experience on a much larger scale throughout wide districts on the Continent.”

31. Duffy (1898, 2:17–18) recorded a favorable remark by Thornton referring to Duffy’s own proposal for creating a “prosperous Yeomanry in Ireland”: “It has interested me (said Mr. Thornton) more than any paper I have read for some time, for it seems to me to present the most feasible scheme that has yet been proposed for affecting the social regeneration of Ireland. God speed you I say most heartily, and if at any time I see any way of aiding the good work depend upon my co-operation as well as my good wishes.”

32. In the preface to *A Plea for Peasant Proprietors*, Thornton referred approvingly to Mill’s series of articles in the *Morning Chronicle*, acknowledging “the advantage of his support.”

Thornton continued the practice of sending his writings to political luminaries of the day, most notably the prime minister, Lord John Russell, who in a brief note dated 10 February 1848 passed “his compliments to Mr Thornton,” thanking “him for a copy of his work entitled ‘A Plea for Peasant Proprietors.’”³³ Another letter dated 4 June 1848, from the Duke of Rutland, the owner of substantial landholdings in North Derbyshire, thanks Thornton “for [his] most welcome present of a copy of the ‘Plea for Peasant Proprietors.’” Rutland further notes that he has “seldom read any work which interested [him] more, or one which satisfied so completely alike [his] feelings and [his] reason,” adding, “I will hope your plea will not be in vain, but that many will carefully study its arguments and studying be convinced of its truth.” While completely endorsing Thornton’s critical disclosures in relation to peasant properties in the Channel Islands, continental Europe, and Ireland, the duke discreetly draws Thornton’s attention to the prosperity enjoyed by small tenant holders on the duke’s own estate, commenting that: “Though but little corn is grown in them, and peasant proprietors are few, the small holdings—which are very numerous, show a comfort and social independence most delightful to witness. Not a peasant who has not a cow or two in his croft, a good garden, or orchard, often both, about his house, and a sofa or two within.”

In the early 1870s, Thornton decided to release a second edition of *A Plea for Peasant Proprietors*. The idea was originally put forward in the mid-1860s by John Stuart Mill (1972, 930, 15:948–49), whose renewed, heightened interest in Irish land tenure reform had been vigorously pursued during a brief, albeit colorful, parliamentary career as member for Westminster between 1865 and 1868 (see Kinzer 2001 for further discussion). In 1874, a second edition appeared in a format containing an expanded treatment of the original proposal to resettle Irish pauper families on reclaimed wastelands. Thornton forwarded this revised version to Prime Minister William Gladstone, whose Liberal administration had swept to power in the general election of 1868. Notably, it was during Gladstone’s tenure that the first Irish Land Act (1870) was passed, as were several other key reforms whose stated purpose was “to pacify Ireland.” In a letter dated 2 April 1874, Gladstone generously acknowledged Thorn-

33. The reader’s attention may be drawn to Russell’s having recommended the introduction of a limited measure for compulsory purchase of wasteland in response to the crippling state of the Irish economy in the second half of the 1840s (see Kinzer 2001, 94). Facing stern opposition in the House of Lords, Russell decided not to implement the reclamation experiment as proposed by Mill and Thornton (see Black 1960, 178–89, for further comment).

ton's "kindness in sending me your work on Peasant Proprietors, which I am reading with great interest." Gladstone went on to say that he hoped the book would "aid in dispelling the mass of prejudices, which prevail in this country on the important subject of this work."³⁴

An important member of Gladstone's Liberal administration between 1868 and 1874, with whom Thornton formed a close alliance, was George Douglas Campbell, the eighth Duke of Argyll, holder of the cabinet office of secretary of state for India. As the head of the London branch of the government of India, Argyll introduced a series of important administrative reforms into India, the successful implementation of which required his working closely with the heads of the various departments within the India Office, including Thornton, then secretary of the public works department. The two men seem to have formed a close and convivial working relationship: Argyll thought very highly of Thornton's industriousness and disciplined working habits and in 1873 recommended Thornton for the Companion of the Order of the Bath (CB) for services to the India Office; a few years later, Thornton dedicated his book, *Indian Public Works, and Cognate Indian Topics* (1875), to Argyll.³⁵ Despite the general feeling of empathy between the two men, Argyll, as a wealthy country squire in his time away from Whitehall's political foment, seldom found himself in agreement with his trusted lieutenant as far as agrarian matters were concerned.

In a letter dated 13 March 1874, Argyll courteously thanked Thornton for sending him a complimentary copy of *A Plea for Peasant Proprietors*, a book he anticipated reading "with much interest." A letter written a few months later onboard his yacht, however, reveals a marked change in the duke's friendly attitude; having read parts of Thornton's book concerning

34. The reader might be curious about whether any of Thornton's land reform proposals were ever implemented. Certainly, the extensive social planning he envisioned was never fully implemented, although certain aspects of his ambitious program (e.g., legal control of rents) eventually became enshrined in the Irish land tenure legislation introduced by the first and second Gladstone ministries.

35. The depth of their connection can also be gauged by a poignant letter dated 17 June 1880 that Edward Zohrab Thornton, William Thornton's "soldier son," received from Argyll on the occasion of Thornton's death, wherein Argyll wrote: "I am much grieved to hear of Thornton's death. He gave me the impression of being one of the best men I have ever known—so conscientious—and amiable and affectionate in disposition. I had not heard of his illness—else I should have gone to see him." In a subsequent letter to Edward Zohrab Thornton, written fifteen years after his father's death, Argyll said that it had given him "much pleasure to have any opportunity of speaking with your father for whom I had the warmest regard and respect."

land tenure, Argyll felt obliged to mention that the book's "whole reasoning and the fundamental conclusion" seemed "to involve bad political economy, and to point to a system of policy destructive of progress and injurious to the greatest scheme of national wealth." The duke was particularly incensed by Thornton's uncritical adoption of "Mill's doctrine of the 'unearned increment'" together with his recommendation to impose a tax on the unimproved value of land. Argyll, being a landowner of substantial means, was always alert to the general concordance between sound economic judgment and the need to protect his vested interests. He complained to Thornton about the latter's adopting, "for the purpose of teaching," the "extremist form" of "Mill's doctrine," which seemed to him "most pernicious." The duke, however, being unable to "pursue the subject . . . in a note in the cabin of a yacht," nor wishing to strain otherwise congenial relations with a valuable subordinate, concludes the letter on a warm note by inviting his India House colleague to "visit a Scotch zemindar . . . in October" where he "could discuss the matter in conversation."

T. E. Cliffe-Leslie, a fellow Millite who also devoted his time to the issue of peasant proprietors, gave the second, 1874, edition of *A Plea for Peasant Proprietors* an overall favorable review in the *Academy*. Cliffe-Leslie (1874, 419) reminded readers that the first (1848) edition of Thornton's *Plea* had appeared at about the same time that John Stuart Mill's *A System of Logic, Ratiocinative and Inductive*, which appeared in 1843, and *Principles of Political Economy with Some of Their Applications to Social Philosophy*, which appeared in 1848, "had begun to arouse a questioning spirit." "Mr. Thornton," he continued, "found it necessary to combat" dubious "arguments against ownership of the soil by the peasantry," a view in which Cliffe-Leslie fully concurred, adding: "The question of the productiveness of small farms is, of course, closely connected with the question of the effects of peasant proprietorship, and Mr. Thornton's first chapter shows that a comparison in that respect between large and small farms is not to the disadvantage of the latter."

According to Cliffe-Leslie, Thornton was "the first economist in England to draw attention to the relative affluence of the English peasantry at a time when small freeholds, copyholds, leaseholds, and cottage farms were numerous, and the labourer had commonly a few acres and some stock of his own in addition to his wages" (419). Cliffe-Leslie was, of course, referring to the romantic, bucolic vision of the yeoman class as well as the

“advantages of mediaeval rural economy” in which “the humblest rank of the rural population had three cows, three large sows, a sheep, a cock and seven hens” and whose “ordinary diet” consisted of “milk and brown bread . . . with bacon, and sometimes an egg or two.” There was only one aspect of Thornton’s authoritative account with which Cliffe-Leslie took issue, which was the unsubstantiated assertion that “the number of landed proprietors in France had long remained stationary.” Here, Cliffe-Leslie was revealing his own research interests; however, on the main substantive issue of “the superior profit of *la petite culture*,” he felt compelled to say that Thornton’s “opponents will not easily find a frail link” (420).

In preparing the second edition of *A Plea for Peasant Proprietors*, Thornton had reacquainted himself with the literature consulted in preparing the original manuscript. He supplemented this with more recent material expounding on the subject of Irish land tenure reform. In a letter dated 29 June 1873 to the Marquis of Ava and Dufferin (in response to Dufferin’s note congratulating Thornton on being presented with the title of Companion of the Bath), Thornton mentions the marquis’ own “two volumes on Irish affairs” as invaluable background preparatory reading material. The letter continues: “When I first read these I found a number of points on which I intended some time or other to ask you for some additional details and in all probability I shall find the same desire recurring in the second perusal.” Not wanting to “trespass” on Dufferin’s “good nature,” Thornton politely inquires as to the possibility of being permitted “to send you over a string of queries,” adding, “I know you would not object to this if you were more at leisure but it is likely enough, now, that you may have too many other things to attend to, to be able to spare time for satisfying my curiosity even on a subject in which you take so special an interest as Irish Land Tenure.”³⁶

In short, *A Plea for Peasant Proprietors* had a successful run in terms of the influential people whom its message reached. This was driven

36. As an Irish peer and extensive landowner, Dufferin’s acute awareness of the sufferings of Irish tenants in the wake of the great famine led him to take initiatives designed to relieve their distress on his own estates. In later years, Dufferin contributed several pamphlets on Irish land tenure issues, including “Contributions to an Inquiry into the State of Ireland” in 1866 and “Mr Mill’s Plan for the Pacification of Ireland Examined” in 1868, the latter being a direct critique of Mill’s *England and Ireland* of 1868 (see Kinzer 2001, 192–93, for further comment). Neither work, however, is mentioned in the 1874 edition of *A Plea for Peasant Proprietors*, suggesting that these may have been perused purely in their capacity as preliminary background reading material.

largely by Mill, who, having read the proofs of the first edition, incorporated factual evidence on peasant reclamation of wastelands into both the first and the second editions of his *Principles of Political Economy*, thereby increasing the book's public exposure. Indeed, as argued by Kinzer (2001, 53–55), there can be little doubt that “Mill was heavily indebted to . . . Thornton . . . [for] much of the factual evidence concerning peasant proprietors which bolstered Mill's policy prescriptions.”

The two men continued discussing the topic of peasant proprietorship until Mill's death in 1873. In letters to Mill in the 1860s and 1870s, at times composed while he was recuperating his health in Europe, Thornton elaborated “on this pet subject of yours and mine”; lucid accounts of agricultural ventures in Holland, Germany, and Belgium were attached. Here, in private letters, Thornton attempted reproduction of the same aesthetic qualities, moral ideals, and economic fundamentals advocated in his early economic writings. In a letter dated 10 October 1869, he refers favorably to “the proverbial industry of peasant proprietors” and adds that while he was on “an excursion into the Adewald” (in Holland) he approvingly inspected “half a dozen farms . . . averaging perhaps not less than 70 acres and the fields all . . . fairly tilled.” In the same letter, however, he expressed disappointment while reporting a “six mile walk” through “the thick of [the] peasant properties” in the district “of the Pays de Waes” where he encountered several farms whose condition “did not in all respects come up to my expectations” (quoted in Donoghue 2000, 336). All the same, he maintained, “the district must be exceedingly productive in order to be able to maintain with so much apparent comfort the very large agricultural population imposed upon it” (336).³⁷

Further evidence of Thornton's lifelong study of agrarian subjects materializes in three volumes of poetry published in the 1850s; these cover several themes touched upon in his early work (Lipkes 1996, 118). Thornton was counted among several competent “Victorian penny-in-the-slot poets” in India House who “dabbled in poetry” (Williams 1983, 82, 417). He employed the medium of poetry as a device to reflect on the

37. Thornton's published writings and unpublished letters communicate invaluable descriptions of peasant properties visited while Thornton was holidaying in continental Europe (including and not limited to observations of interior decoration, furnishing, and architecture). His work, however, contained little evidence of his ever having experienced peasant holdings in the British Isles—despite indications that he had once been invited to such a holding.

changed economic relationships of the day, all the while waxing lyrical in sentimental evocations of rural life. Thornton's (1854) first collection of verse, *Zohrab; or, A Midsummer Day's Dream and Other Poems*, contains a poem called "The Cottage Allotment; An English Pastoral." It is a pastoral vision of "Old England" in which two farmers—Smith and Johnson—hold a conversation about the risks and struggles of tenant farming in rural England. Johnson, much to Smith's consternation, is fortunate enough to lease farmland from "a good landlord." Smith, as with many other tenant farmers at the time, has been dispossessed of his farm and is going into exile. He bemoans the fact that many farmers and their families have been given little choice but to emigrate to the United States in search of a better life, while others contemplate an "escape" to "New Zealand's lonely isles." The poem is employed as a device to capture, through the conversation between Smith and Johnson, the predicament of the tenant farmer's economic position; it champions the cause of a downtrodden stratum of society.³⁸

Other poetical compositions attempt to present an idealized pastoral society extolling the virtues of English provincial life, while frowning upon the commercial activities of the towns. A central element in many of these poetical compositions is "the noble yeomanry" as a living embodiment of the celebrated virtues of English provincial life. A striking example of this literary genre lies in Thornton's (1857) third volume of poetry, *Modern Manicheism, Labour's Utopia, and Other Poems*. "Labour's Utopia" is a wistful reminiscence of a golden age when the yeoman, not the merchant, was the social ideal. Again the unequal economic relationship depicted between the farmer and tenant is contrasted with an earlier age in which the independent yeoman thrived, with his family, in a beneficent and harmonious rural society (see Lipkes, 1996, 118, for further comment). In eulogizing idealized rural felicity, Thornton laments the growing importance of the town, as against the province in English life. In the proposal to resettle Irish pauper families on reclaimed wasteland, he attempted, perhaps, to project the remnants of a bygone era onto an idealistic vision of the future, the patent utopian vision that recalled an idealized Victorian tradition of the Middle Ages.

38. In this context, the tenant farmer, entitled to a "fair" share of the product of the farm, acts as a bridge between the pastoral world of the displaced farm laborer and that of the yeoman or peasant proprietor farming his own land.

7. Concluding Remarks

William Thornton has never gained admission to the list of “leading thinkers” of the Victorian age. It would be imprudent, however, to suggest that his intellectual contributions went unnoticed by contemporaries; Mirowski and Tradewell (1999, 4) argue that his early works provided the seed for others to expand upon, while his later economic writings “touched a pervasive chord for many writers in that crucial period of the 1860s/70s in Britain.”

Thornton’s early economic writings are a crucial source in gaining an appreciation of Victorian thinking on a range of key economic and social questions during the first half of the nineteenth century. Ekelund and Thornton (2001) have prudently labeled Thornton an orthodox classical political economist, based on his use of the principles underlying the fundamental classical orthodoxy of the day. His acceptance of the classical wage fund doctrine and the Malthusian population principle, two central tenets of classical economics, buttressed his already robust study on overpopulation and poverty in the British Isles. Broadly speaking, Thornton’s views on public policy questions, as occasionally pointed out, were consistent with conventional classical thought on topical issues such as the poor laws, the factory acts, and the Irish question. As with most classical economists, Thornton deigned to sanction, on humanitarian grounds, a limited program of “state interference” as a prelude to improving social conditions. To this end, he advocated statutory poor relief, public education, government-sponsored land reform programs, and legislation preventing children from enduring the anguish of manual labor. These issues certainly acted as forces that brought his work to the attention of several notable Victorian public figures.

Yet, despite his grounding in and attachment to classical political economy, Thornton’s early economic writings contain occasional departures from classical doctrines, another indication of the divisions and diversity of opinions within the classical school. Thus, while some economics commentators explained the increasing misery of the poor by the rise of manufacturing, Thornton viewed the problem from a different perspective. He laid stress upon the encroachments of the predatory landowning elite as being largely responsible for the distress experienced within rural communities throughout the British Isles. Acting from humanitarian motives, the majority of classical economists supported the reduction of children’s hours of work in factories as well as the lifting of their working age. Yet Thornton showed his willingness to deviate from the path charted by

leading classicists such as Robert Torrens, John McCulloch, and Nassau Senior on the economic impact of the Factory Acts, especially in relation to Senior's conviction that profits were accrued in the last hour of the working day. Large-scale emigration programs (from the countryside to large industrial towns) were frequently proposed by classical writers as potential remedies for rural unemployment. However, Thornton never really believed that the precariousness of rural employment could be resolved through emigration, although he tentatively conceded that pressing concerns often forced its application. The classical economists defended, by and large, the New Poor Law with its carefully circumscribed regulations governing mobility and eligibility. Thornton readily accepted the principle of public assistance for the needy, young, and aged, realizing all the while that the New Poor Law would be little more successful in solving the long-term problem of overpopulation and poverty in Britain than had been its predecessor.

Thornton remained convinced, however, that the key to resolving the economic and social imbalances prevalent within rural districts ultimately rested upon the introduction of peasant proprietorship. This particular idea resonated with the intellectual undercurrent in Thornton's earlier work of improving the condition of the poor, and added to it a desire "to cling to the memory of the past" (Thornton 1848, 102). His discussions of agricultural change and poor relief as catalysts of economic improvement, for example, combined with his poetic impulses, allowed him to create rustic montages depicting sober, hardworking, and self-reliant yeomen coexisting harmoniously in rural enclaves. The underlying purpose here was the resolution of a crisis of poverty and overpopulation, simultaneously evoking an aesthetic quality that appealed to mid-Victorian ideals of duty, fortitude, and independence. The inspiration was the concept of morality with which Thornton appealed to the Victorian public; his proposals were entirely consistent with the ideology of Victorian social and moral reforms in emphasizing the active shaping of character and virtuous habits of conduct. It expressed concern for the common good as an object of moral action, all the while placing due emphasis on altruistic behavior.

Thornton's confidence in the ambitious plan to establish peasant proprietors on reclaimed wastelands never abated throughout his lifetime. In a last-ditch effort published in the *Fortnightly Review*, "The Bright Clauses of the Irish Land Act: A Supplementary Plea for Peasant Proprietors," Thornton (1879) evaluated the impact of two enactments, both

“aiming at one same object”: the Irish Church Act of 1869 and the Irish Land Act of 1870. (Certain clauses in the latter had been advanced by John Bright, sometime president of the Board of Trade in Gladstone’s first ministry.) Thornton (1879, 609) believed that the “first of these arrangements” had “operated very successfully” in terms of the number of “bonà-fide tenants” now occupying farmland under its terms. He evaluated the Irish Land Act, however, as little other than “a nearly complete failure” due to the fact that few tenants availed themselves of the opportunity to acquire their respective land holdings. “Struck by so wide a difference in the results of two enactments aiming at one self-same object,” Thornton proceeded to explain the reasons for the relative success and failure of each piece of legislation: “Whereas the Church Commissioners took great pains to enable an ignorant peasantry to understand and appreciate the facilities placed within their reach, the Landed Estates Court deemed itself to be adequately carrying out the intentions of Parliament in leaving the peasantry to discover for themselves the nature and value of those facilities” (610). In Thornton’s view, the elevation of the peasant occupiers to the proprietors of the soil that they cultivated remained the only feasible solution to Ireland’s perennial land tenure problems. To that end, neither the land tenure legislation introduced under the auspices of Gladstone’s (first) Liberal government nor the more far-reaching enactments granted to the Irish tenants in the early 1880s during Gladstone’s second ministry ever fully satisfied the objectives Thornton had delineated in his agrarian writings, yet another salutary reminder that nineteenth-century public reformers often pushed their ideas forward until they exceeded the limits prescribed by society at large. Nevertheless, emphasis should be laid on the fact that many of the later reforms, which Thornton sadly did not live to witness, would certainly have met with his (as well as Mill’s) imprimatur.

No study of Thornton, however, can claim completeness without including an evaluation of John Stuart Mill’s hand in promoting Thornton’s literary and professional careers (see Donoghue 2004 for further comment). Mill was quick in recognizing a kindred spirit in the younger man, making use of his early ideas to kindle his own passion for the subject. Eventually, despite the occasional difference of opinion, Thornton came to be regarded as “one of the few friends who communicated freely with [Mill] during his seclusion” (Stephen 1900, 3:187). Mill’s eventual shift in position on the Irish question, from favoring the adoption of the large-scale model of English farming to advocating eventual

resettlement on reclaimed wastelands, owed much to Thornton's dialogues on the subject (see Martin 1976, 301; Black 1982, 38; and Kinzer 2001, 53–55). Indeed, Mill's biographer and close friend, Alexander Bain (1882, 86), later commented that William Thornton "first awakened him to the question of peasant properties." From an economic viewpoint, Thornton's discussion of the role of economic incentives in molding social and moral conduct would certainly have appealed to Mill, specifically the emphasis he placed on the importance of public education both in the formation of character and as a means to achieving independence from the stultifying effects of public relief. As is well known, Mill cultivated intellectual relationships with individuals who shared his philosophical and social outlooks. Thornton's limiting of his own policy proposals to the canons of the classical system would certainly have sat well with Mill, considering Mill's own educational grounding in the concepts and methods of the classical economists.

The various public policy issues addressed by Thornton are held together by a common thread linking his earlier economic writings to his later works: a commitment to the social and economic betterment of the most vulnerable members of society. In his early economic works, he lent a sympathetic ear to the precarious economic position of both rural and urban laborers, outlining various measures toward alleviating their misery. That theme developed in several directions, as reflected by his poetical outpourings of the 1850s, his economic dialogues in the 1860s, and in several publications devoted to Indian affairs during the 1870s. His early economic work formed the keystone in his platform of reform; critical analysis of it reveals more clearly the development of his economic thought, enabling a better understanding of the manner in which Thornton's work was woven into the fabric of mid-Victorian intellectual and public debate.

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