Trevelyan, Sir Charles Edward

by Robin Haines

Trevelyan, Sir Charles Edward (1807–86), 1st baronet, civil servant, was born 2 April 1807 at Nettlecombe rectory, Somerset, the fourth son of six sons and three daughters of the Ven. George Trevelyan (1764–1827), rector of Nettlecombe, third son of the 4th baronet of Nettlecombe, an estate which had been the family's seat since 1452. The Ven. George Trevelyan, who had begun his clerical life as a guards chaplain, rose successively to be canon of Wells, archdeacon of Bath, and archdeacon of Taunton in Somerset, where the Trevelyans were principal landholders. His wife was born Harriet Neave (1772/3–1854), daughter of a wealthy merchant, Sir Richard Neave (1731–1814), who was for forty-eight years a director, then a governor, of the Bank of England. His grandson, Sheffield Neave (1799–1868), Charles Trevelyan's first cousin, was a director of the bank during the commercial crisis of 1847 in the midst of the Irish famine, which placed Trevelyan, as assistant secretary at the treasury, in a prime position to gain intelligence on the state of the bank's finances during that catastrophic period.

Trevelyan was educated until the age of ten at a local day school in Taunton. From 1817 he attended Blundell's School in Tiverton, Devon, where the headmaster was a notorious flogger. From 1820 he attended Charterhouse, where he was shepherded towards the East India Company's service. A prize-winning pupil, he excelled at classical languages. In 1824, at the age of seventeen, he entered the East India Company's training college at Haileybury, Hertfordshire, where he studied oriental languages, classics, mathematics, natural philosophy, political economy, modern history, and law, earning top honours in classics and Sanskrit and graduating head of the list for the Bengal civil service. At the age of eighteen, in 1826, Trevelyan sailed for India, where, at Fort William College in Calcutta, he passed examinations in Hindi and Persian, winning two gold medals and the attention of his superiors.

A young man of outstanding ability with a strong civic sense, he was attached to the revenue department as assistant to Sir Charles Metcalfe, the resident of Delhi. He was a fervent supporter of education in the vernacular languages of India, and of teaching English to the sons of the middle and merchant classes in preparation for independence. Following a posting as political agent to Bikaner on the western frontier, he was embroiled in controversy in 1829 when, barely twenty-three years old and at great risk to his own reputation and career, he successfully prosecuted his superior, Sir Edward Colebrooke, resident of Delhi, who was subsequently disgraced and dismissed for taking bribes. Trevelyan's reputation for reform and corruption-free, economical government stems from this time. In 1830 he planned and partly funded a model suburb on 300 acres of land outside the Lahore Gates in Delhi. The following year he was appointed by Lord William Bentinck as a deputy secretary to the political department in the secretariat at Calcutta, where he met and married, on
23 December 1834, Hannah More Macaulay (1810–73), daughter of the abolitionist Zachary Macaulay and sister of Thomas Babington Macaulay, member of the council of India, with whom they set up house. A daughter, Margaret, was born in 1835; another daughter, Harriet Selina, died within a few months of her birth in January 1837 and was buried at Calcutta.

In company with Macaulay, the Trevelyans arrived home on furlough in June 1838. On 1 January 1840, just before he was due to return to India, Trevelyan was unexpectedly offered the post of assistant secretary at the treasury, which he accepted; he held the position until 1859. Between 1845 and 1850 he oversaw the cataclysmic years of the Irish famine, a period that has gained him, in some quarters, an infamous reputation. Recent scholarship suggests that the condemnation of Trevelyan over his supervision of famine relief in 1845–50 is unjustified. Although his intemperate statements and bombastic nature have drawn the wrath of his critics, he was not the architect of relief policy, and does not deserve the blame for the government's parsimonious response to the catastrophe. Rather, as assistant secretary to the treasury, and civilian head of the commissariat, he was responsible for deploying official expenditure of about £10 million (roughly £500 million in modern values) in relief. Bent on supervising every avenue of relief, he engaged in a massive correspondence at all levels, bequeathing a mountainous, minutely detailed archive. An advocate of ecumenicalism, and friend to many catholics, including Fr Theobald Mathew (qv), he loathed sectarianism and came down hard upon relief officers who showed signs of anti-catholic or anti-Irish feeling. He was a whig by inclination and advocated the laissez-faire principles of both governments under which he served during the famine, preferring soup kitchens to the unwieldy public-works scheme of relief, which often failed to reach those most in need of it.

While Trevelyan has been vilified for his dogmatic attachment to free trade, and for lacking compassion towards the Irish, many of his abrasive comments directed at landlords, whom he saw as abrogating their responsibilities, have been erroneously taken as directed at the poor, for whom in fact he reserved his sympathy. Trevelyan was an opinionated man caught up in the tensions between Westminster, Whitehall, and Dublin castle. Yet, in spite of his shortcomings, he was determined to deliver relief to a country to which he was attached by ties of affection and ancestry.

Often referred to as the ‘father of modern treasury practice’, Trevelyan introduced far-ranging reforms in the civil service. Between 1849 and 1853 he was a member of several commissions investigating administration of the home office, treasury, and thirteen other departments, culminating in the report he produced in 1854 with Sir Stafford Northcote, which is commonly referred to as the Northcote–Trevelyan report. As was to happen so often in his career, he antagonised many of his peers during its drafting, particularly over his opposition to patronage connected with civil service appointments, and the introduction of competitive examinations for entry. In 1857 he was satirised as ‘Sir Gregory Hardlines’ by his civil service colleague the
novelist Anthony Trollope (qv), in *The three clerks*. Trollope afterwards admitted that, though he opposed the reforms, he remained a firm friend of Trevelyan, who was amused by Trollope’s characterisation of him. At the select committee of the house of lords on the renewal of the East India Company’s charter in 1853, Trevelyan (typically) advocated equal rights for Hindus, Muslims, and Christians, and the appointment of Indians to senior posts.

In 1859 Trevelyan returned to India as governor of Madras where, characteristically, he made many friends and not a few enemies, including James Wilson, finance member of the governor general’s council, an old adversary. In 1860 Trevelyan was reluctantly recalled to London by the president of the board of control, Sir Charles Wood, after he made public his opposition to Wilson’s levying of income tax, a policy to which Trevelyan was ardently and vociferously opposed. In an ironic twist, in 1862 Trevelyan returned to India as finance member of the governor general’s council in Calcutta, a public vindication of his earlier stance. In both positions he advocated land reform, and attempted to balance the scales in the Indian justice system. He was attacked in the press for his strong opinions, and was the first governor to invite Indians of all walks of life to social occasions at Government House. His inflammatory speeches and brash manner did not endear him to many of his countrymen.

Suffering from ill health, Trevelyan retired in 1865, henceforward dividing his time between London and his seat at Wallington, Northumberland, which he inherited from his cousin, the Pre-Raphaelite patron Sir Walter Calverley Trevelyan in 1879; there he gained a reputation as a reforming landlord, and a staunch liberal supporter. In retirement, as an advocate of volunteerism and self-help in charitable enterprise, a warm supporter of local government, and an opponent of centralisation, he played a prominent part in the Charity Organisation Society. In retirement he wrote letters to the press, as he had done since his early days as a civil servant, often under the pseudonyms ‘Indophilus’ and ‘Philalethes’, and continued to publish pamphlets on a range of subjects until his death at his London residence, 67 Eaton Square, on 19 June 1886. He was buried in Cambo churchyard, Northumberland, on 25 June 1886, and a memorial, designed and executed by E. J. Physick, was erected there in February 1887. His motto was ‘Mindful of future generations’.

On 6 May 1848 Trevelyan was made KCB for his services during the famine, and on 2 March 1874 he was created a baronet. After the death of his first wife in 1873, Trevelyan married, on 14 October 1875, Eleanora Anne Campbell (1829–1919), daughter of Walter Campbell of Islay. She outlived him by thirty-three years. Upon his death his wealth was calculated at £50,801 17s. 6d., probated on 6 September 1886. His son, Sir George Otto Trevelyan (qv), was chief secretary for Ireland (1882–4). In January 1851 Lady Trevelyan (qv) was presented with a portrait by Eden Eddis of her husband, aged forty-one, sitting beside his desk at the treasury, with the famine blue books at his feet. Commissioned in 1848 by the senior officers of the commissariat, ‘as a mark of respect for the high character and abilities of our
official Chief’, it hangs at Wallington. Numerous prints of the etching, by F. Joubert, were distributed to commissariat officers worldwide. Another portrait, of the eighteen-year-old Trevelyan, about to depart for India, also hangs at Wallington. Numerous etchings can be found in the pages of the *Illustrated London News*.

In addition to scores of official reports, Trevelyan published numerous articles and pamphlets including: ‘The aristocracy of rank: is it the aristocracy of talent?’, *Fraser’s Magazine*, xxiv (1846), 159–66; ‘Charity electioneering’, *Macmillan’s Magazine*, xxix (1874), 171–6; *Extracts from a description of the measures for relieving the distress caused by the Irish famine entitled ‘The Irish crisis’* (1879); ‘The Irish crisis’, *Edinburgh Review*, clxxv (Jan. 1848), 229–320; *The Irish crisis* (1848); *The Irish crisis: being a narrative of the measures for relief of the distress caused by the Great Irish Famine of 1846–7* (1880); *The no-popper agitation, and the Liverpool corporation schools* (1840); *On the education of the people of India* (1838); and *Papers originally published at Calcutta in 1834 and 1836, on the application of the Roman letters to the languages of Asia* (1858).

Letter books, personal papers, and correspondence are in the Robinson Library, University of Newcastle upon Tyne. Trevelyan's official papers and correspondence are in Treasury Papers (Irish relief) and Commissariat (War Office) Papers, National Archives (Kew). Holdings of his correspondence with others include: Clarendon Deposit, Bodl.; Gladstone Papers, BL; papers of Sir James Graham, BL; Montagle Papers, NLI; papers of Sir Robert Peel, BL; papers of Lord John Russell, National Archives (Kew); and papers of Sir Charles Wood (Hickleton Papers), Borthwick Institute, University of York.
