

# nonfiction

## Malthus and the philosophy of famine

**This curate's tale is only good in parts, says Gregory Clark**



**Malthus: The Life and Legacies of an Untimely Prophet**  
by Robert J Mayhew

Harvard, 296pp  
£20 \* £18; ebook £20

‘Compulsory sterilization. Avoidable famine. Auschwitz. We have come a long way from an amiable Surrey cleric,’ writes the historian Robert Mayhew. How did an obscure English country curate, Thomas Robert Malthus, come to publish in 1798 the immediately scandalous *An Essay on the Principle of Population*? And did that essay exercise a malign influence in subsequent centuries? This scholarly, heavily footnoted book sets out to answer these questions.

The *Essay* was controversial because of its central claim: the urge to procreate would defeat all attempts — political, economic or technological — to improve the conditions of humanity. Without fertility control, population would be restrained by “misery and vice”. Agriculture could not keep up with rising numbers of people, so starvation or impoverishment was the natural consequence of every extra mouth to feed.

This claim became a central tenet of classical economics. It inspired England’s draconian New Poor Law of 1834, which created the workhouse to encourage the poor to industry and discourage them from procreation. This Poor Law doctrine helped to kill a million people in the Irish



**LETHAL LEGISLATION**  
The Poor Law doctrine, inspired by Malthus, helped to kill a million people in the Irish Famine

famine of 1845-49: the Irish poor were worked to death under starvation rations by Poor Law authorities concerned that the potato blight would create a permanent pauper army burdening Irish landlords and taxpayers.

The story of Malthus and his *Essay* is replete with irony. First there is Malthus himself. Modest, polite, considerate, a family man, conventionally educated, he laboured to produce prosaic sermons for his rural flock. Nothing in his circumstances would predict him as author of the savage gospel of the *Essay*.

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Next is the irony that Malthus's insight into the connection between fertility and living standards arrived in 1798, just as the Industrial Revolution finally severed this connection. Malthus was on the wrong side of history but given the information available at the time, he was on the right side of evidence and logic. His insights are essential to understanding pre-industrial societies, and indeed we talk now of the Malthusian Era to describe life before the Industrial Revolution.

The Malthusian insight, however, was just as available to the Philosophes of the earlier 18th-century Enlightenment. The arrival of the Black Death in Europe in 1347, for example, provided ample demonstration of the negative effect of population on living standards. Depopulation caused by the plague raised living standards across Europe to unprecedented levels, levels not again seen in some countries until the 20th century. Why did it fall to Malthus to make the connection between fertility, mortality and living standards?

Unfortunately, Mayhew's book offers no convincing solution to this mystery. Malthus's surviving correspondence with family and friends before 1798 contains more about the quotidian, such as his mother's swollen ankles, than about the formation of his social thought. As curate of Okewood Chapel, Malthus would have been aware of the straitened conditions of the rural poor, their dependence on poor relief and their growing numbers. But the gains from innovations, and from growing international trade, meant that in the England of the 1790s population growth induced only very modest declines in living conditions.

The book offers more on the influence of Malthus on contemporaries, and on later debates and social movements. Here, again, there is irony. The proponents of family planning in England from 1877 onwards were organised in the Malthusian League, yet Malthus thought abstinence the only acceptable birth control. Malthus was cited as an inspiration by the eugenics movement, yet he never advocated fertility

limitation just for the poor or undesirable.

Malthusian thinking also influenced British policy in India. Colonial administrators believed that lower living standards were a consequence of the Pax Britannica imposed on India after the Mutiny, which meant that fewer Indians were killed in conflict: the natural state of India was thus one of periodic famine. Mayhew argues that Winston Churchill's acceptance of this Malthusian view prompted his denial of emergency relief to the victims of the Bengal Famine of 1942-43, on the grounds that "Indians [are] breeding like rabbits".

Mayhew goes too far in connecting Malthus with the Holocaust. The section recasting Hitler's doctrine of *Lebensraum* as in part inspired by his introduction to Malthus's writings in Landsberg Prison seems forced and implausible.

### **Was Malthus a social science pioneer? Or a peddler of pernicious falsehoods, a quack?**

This raises a general question about the significance of Malthus in intellectual history. Was he a pioneering social scientist who made a lasting contribution to the study of early human societies? Or was he a peddler of pernicious falsehoods, a quack, whose name should be spoken with contempt? Mayhew is ambiguous on this.

Malthus was mistaken about the modern world, and those he inspired did damage. But one of the founding ideas of modern liberal society is that even disturbing ideas, factually grounded, have their place. The inability of later writers to treat Malthus and his theory non-vituperatively speaks more to the continued failings of intellectual discourse than to any fault of Malthus himself. Malthus is, unambiguously, one of the greats in the history of social science.

**Gregory Clark is the author of *The Son Also Rises: Surnames and the History of Social Mobility***