

‘114 commissions and 60 committees’: phantom figures from a surveillance state¹

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Abstract

It has been suggested by historians and other critics that following the Act of Union in 1801, Ireland was the object of unusually intense interest on the part of the London parliament and the British public. This assumption is often supported by the observation that 114 parliamentary commissions were established to investigate Ireland between 1800 and 1833. This figure is, in fact, entirely false, the real amount being closer to fourteen. Here the history of this implausible statistic is traced from 1834, when it originated, through to 2008. Some reasons why such an improbable figure was accepted and repeated are suggested, and the preconceptions among historians about nineteenth-century government and Anglo-Irish relations that are implied by that acceptance are explored.

Introduction

A student of Irish history in the first half of the nineteenth century will, sooner or later, discover a statistic, which at first sight is spectacular, then puzzling, and finally implausible. It occurs, for example, in one of the best-selling books ever published on Irish history, and certainly the best-known book on the Great Famine, Cecil Woodham-Smith's *The great hunger*. The first chapter of the book outlines the economic and social problems present in Ireland on the eve of the Famine, and ends with a discussion of the response of the state to those problems. The issues were familiar to legislators, according to Woodham-Smith. ‘In the forty-five years since the Union,’ she writes, ‘no fewer than 114 Commissions and 61 Special committees were instructed to report on the state of Ireland, and without exception their findings promised disaster.’²

This is a remarkable statement and suggests an extraordinary level of parliamentary interest in Irish issues. Commissions and committees were the principal modes of parliamentary investigation in this period, as they are still today, and form one of the fundamental sources for nineteenth-century Irish history. As

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¹ I extend my thanks to Joanna Innes and to the anonymous journal referee for their comments and criticisms, and likewise to Gearóid Ó Tuathaigh who also suggested the title.

² Cecil Woodham-Smith, *The great hunger: Ireland 1845–49* (London, 1962), 36.

regards the special committees, by which Woodham-Smith presumably means select committees, these consisted of a small group of MPs interviewing a selection of expert or concerned witnesses in London over a week or two, often during the parliamentary summer recess. They enquired into a wide range of issues, and were a standard part of parliamentary procedure. An average of two or more per year is not implausible.

The question of commissions is slightly different. Royal Commissions were an innovation of the early nineteenth century, and were intended to inquire into wider issues in a way that would not be party political. Their composition was deliberately non-parliamentary (although MPs could and did sit on commissions); they interviewed a wider selection of witnesses and collected a greater range of information than committees, often travelling outside London to do so. Their reports were consequently much longer and more comprehensive than those of committees.³ Some of the commissions on Irish issues are well known, although, pace Woodham-Smith, their predictions of disaster were not unanimous. The 1844 Devon Commission on the occupation of land and the 1835–6 Poor Inquiry are much-cited investigations of social conditions, and they do indeed contain a lot of alarming evidence about economic and social crisis. The 1838 Railway Commission, on the other hand, is more optimistic. There is also the well-known commission on education of the 1820s which led to the creation of the National School system in 1831. Previous to that there was the commission on bogs, which was enthusiastic about the economic potential of bog reclamation. Half a dozen other commissions, such as that on fisheries in 1837 or municipal government in 1834, also spring to mind, but it is difficult to think of more. There are at most ten or twelve commissions whose work would be familiar from the historiography. Where, then, are the other hundred? One hundred and fourteen commissions must surely have produced a wealth of evidence, statistics and opinions, but these are not to be found cited in the literature.

Woodham-Smith does not offer a reference for these figures. The footnote to the paragraph in which they appear refers to a debate in the House of Lords in 1844 on a land tenancy bill, and does not relate to the figures at all. However, as noted, the figures are quoted in many other books. One example, in a field quite different to Woodham-Smith's, is Seamus Deane's *Short history of Irish literature*. Commenting on how Ireland was represented in fiction in the early nineteenth century to English readers, he writes:

It is ironic that, for all the efforts of Irish fiction, Irish political writing and the appointment of '114 commissions and 60 select committees to investigate Irish affairs' by parliament between 1810 and 1833, the English public remained invincibly ignorant of the country's circumstances and history.

³ H.M. Clokie and J.W. Robinson, *Royal Commissions of inquiry* (Stanford, CA, London, 1937), 54–79; Brian Harrison, 'Finding out how the other half live: social research and British government since 1780', in Brian Harrison (ed.), *Peaceable kingdom: stability and change in modern Britain* (Oxford, 1982), 260–308.

Deane's footnote refers us to Nicholas Mansergh's *The Irish question* (1965), which again does not offer a source, perhaps explaining why Deane puts the numbers in inverted commas.⁴

A third statement in the secondary literature proves equally frustrating. This is in Janet Nolan's *Ourselves alone: women's emigration from Ireland, 1885–1920* (1988). According to Nolan, 'By one count, fully 114 commissions and 60 select committees established by the government between 1800 and 1833 investigated the growing economic crisis there'. The source for this is John Pomfret's classic 1930 account of the Land War, *The struggle for land in Ireland 1800–1923*. According to Pomfret, 'Between 1800 and 1833, it is said, no less than 114 commissions and 60 select committees had investigated the state of Ireland'. The rhetorical distancing and uncertainty of Deane's inverted commas is echoed in Nolan's 'by one count' (whose?) and in Pomfret's 'it is said' (by whom?), and the dates, apparently so precise, are also beginning to become less certain. While the figure of 114 commissions is unanimously subscribed to, the 61 select committees have been reduced by one, and there is a divergence as to when these were active. Was it between 1800 and 1845 (Woodham-Smith), 1810 and 1833 (Deane and Mansergh), or 1800 and 1833 (Nolan and Pomfret)? The end date favoured by the majority, 1833, is an odd one to choose, since it marks the beginning of the major investigations that characterised the reformed parliament, and makes the number 114 even more mysterious. (It would rule out five of the seven commissions mentioned above.) It is not a surprise, therefore, to find that the trail through Pomfret is also a dead end. His reference is to a pamphlet by George Poulett Scrope, the English MP and economist, entitled *Ireland before and after the Union*, published in 1844. Scrope was a prolific pamphleteer and publicist and wrote frequently on Irish issues (to the extent that he was referred to as George 'Pamphlet' Scrope). However, he published no such text. Neither the British Library Catalogue nor the most complete guide to the pamphlet literature, Black's *Catalogue of pamphlets on economic subjects*, lists the pamphlet Pomfret cites, or indeed anything published by Scrope or bearing that title for the year 1844.⁵

How many commissions?

At this point exasperated readers may well be asking, how many commissions and committees were there? Moreover why should we care? The issue is an important one on a number of levels. In the first place, a great deal of the social and economic history, and some of the cultural and political history of pre-Famine Ireland is based on the reports of these commissions and committees. To take just one example, a pioneering article on illegitimacy by K.H. Connell, published in 1968, was based almost entirely on one appendix to the Poor Inquiry of 1835, with three-quarters of the footnotes referring to that source or to other parliamentary reports.⁶ By and

⁴ Seamus Deane, *A short history of Irish literature* (London, 1986), 101.

⁵ R.D.C. Black, *A catalogue of pamphlets on economic subjects published between 1750 and 1900 and now housed in Irish libraries* (Belfast, 1969).

⁶ K.H. Connell, 'Illegitimacy before the Famine', in K.H. Connell (ed.), *Irish peasant society: four historical essays* (Dublin, 1968), 51–86.

large, these reports have been treated as transparent sources of information, rather than being viewed as part of a larger state project. It is important to contextualise each report by looking at the wider body of documentation of which it forms a part. In addition, as is evident from the quotations listed above, the estimate of the number of reports has been part of a critique, usually from a nationalist perspective, of the unwillingness or inability of a London government or parliament to deal with Irish issues. The sheer number of putative investigations is a crucial part of this argument. Finally, and more recently, the volume of investigation has been taken as an indicator of Ireland's precocious modernity, usually in commentary written from a post-colonial perspective.

As regards the actual numbers, the figure of 60 select committees is something of an underestimate. There were more than 80 on Irish issues in the years 1800–33. The figure for commissions, however, is a huge overestimate. The standard book on the subject, Clokie and Robinson's *Royal Commissions*, counts 12 Royal Commissions on Irish subjects in those years, rather than 114.⁷ Now, 80 committees and 12 commissions might nevertheless seem to be a lot, but while some of them produced reports which were and are substantial and invaluable to the historian, they did not amount to the suggested barrage of information at the time, for two reasons. Firstly, they were not all about the state of Ireland, in the proper sense. Many of them covered topics which were quite restricted in their topic and not specific to Ireland—there was a commission on street paving in Dublin, for example, and a series of select committees on contested parliamentary elections. Secondly, they constituted only a small part of a much larger body of investigation and publication on the United Kingdom as a whole. In the first three decades of the nineteenth century, there were some 60 Royal Commissions in all, 11 of which related to Ireland. In the same period, select committees on Irish issues comprised about 8% of the total, a figure which decreased in the years that followed. If we bear in mind that Irish MPs constituted one-sixth of the total in parliament, the number of commissions seems a fair representation and the number of select committees a significant under-representation.⁸

In relative terms, therefore, the supposed torrent of information on the social and economic condition of Ireland is to a large extent a chimera. So where did the figures 60 (or 61) and 114, the latter in particular, come from? The most striking thing about the historians who quote these figures is their consistent and complete uniformity. Every writer who cites the number of commissions has the precise yet fantastic figure of 114. There is, moreover, no obvious unifying link between these writers, whether of political outlook or academic specialisation. As well as those mentioned above, the number occurs in books by specialists in the political history of the period, such as Angus McIntyre's *The liberator*, a study of Daniel O'Connell in the 1830s, or Brian Jenkins' account of Dublin Castle in

⁷ There is a list to 1832 in Clokie and Robinson, *Royal Commissions*, 58–9.

⁸ Peter Jupp, 'Government, parliament and politics in Ireland, 1801–41', in Julian Hoppitt (ed.), *Parliaments, nations and identities in Britain and Ireland, 1660–1850* (London, 2003), 146–68.

the 1820s, *Era of emancipation*; in E.R. Norman's scathingly revisionist and Tory *History of modern Ireland*; in Peter Berresford Ellis' Marxist *History of the Irish working class*; and in many other publications.⁹

The first of these books, however, finally starts the trail to the source of the figure. McIntyre cites Llewellyn Woodward's *The age of reform*, a volume of the Oxford History of England published in 1938, which in turn refers to a speech in parliament in 1834 by Thomas Spring Rice, a Co. Limerick landlord and prominent Whig MP, who was, at the time, secretary of the Treasury. As Woodward notes, 'a full list' of the 114 commissions and 60 committees is given in the speech, and here at last we have the original source of the figures.¹⁰ The context, however, is an interesting and revealing one. The occasion of the speech was a debate in the House of Commons on a motion by Daniel O'Connell to establish a select committee (yet another!) to examine the desirability of repealing the Act of Union. Spring Rice was the principal speaker against the motion, and he made the argument that the Union had benefited Ireland materially. He was a keen student of political economy, a proponent of non-denominational education featuring 'useful knowledge' and a founder of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge, and his speech was packed with statistics about trade, agriculture and manufacturing. (O'Connell's view in the aftermath of the debate was that 'Spring Rice figures Ireland into prosperity'.)¹¹ His approach to another argument made by O'Connell, that Ireland's interests were neglected by a parliament which sat in London, was of a piece with this. He listed, year by year, the parliamentary reports which had dealt with Ireland, and added them up:

Now, before he proceeded to what it had done by legislative enactments, he would first take notice of what it had done in the way of inquiry as to the condition of Ireland, and the nature of her alleged wants and grievances. He would take the committees or commissions appointed from 1801 to 1833. In 1801 there were two committees. In 1802 there were two committees on linen. In 1803 there was a committee on the condition of the poor in Ireland. In 1805, a committee on the Grand Canal. In 1806, there were four reports on matters relating to Ireland. In 1809, there was a report on the state of the bogs in Ireland. In 1812, a report on the Green-coat schools. In 1813, a report on the Irish currency. In 1814, there were two committees and four commissions. But it was unnecessary to go on with the detail. There had

⁹ Angus McIntyre, *The liberator: Daniel O'Connell and the Irish party, 1830–1847* (London, 1965), 167; Brian Jenkins, *Era of emancipation: British government of Ireland, 1812–1830* (Kingston, Ontario, 1988), 8; Edward R. Norman, *A history of modern Ireland* (London, 1971), 14; Peter Berresford Ellis, *A history of the Irish working class* (London 1971), 98.

¹⁰ E. Llewellyn Woodward, *The age of reform 1815–1870* (Oxford, 1938), 335.

¹¹ O'Connell to P.V. Fitzpatrick, 29 April 1834 in Maurice O'Connell (ed.), *The correspondence of Daniel O'Connell* Vol. V (n.d., c. 1977), 128.

been in the whole period from 1801 to 1833, 61 reports of committees, and 114 reports of commissions, making 175 in all, relating to Ireland.¹²

There are a number of features of Spring Rice's speech that should be noted. In the first place, it is not clear how he calculated his figures. I could find no reference to this speech among the notes for his parliamentary speeches.¹³ There was at the time no catalogue of committees, commissions and reports, which he could have consulted. However, the first such catalogue, Hansard's *Catalogue and breviat of parliamentary papers*, appeared in August 1834, four months after the speech, and was probably being compiled when Spring Rice was quoting these statistics. One would think that he would have consulted Hansard as he must have been aware of the catalogue's compilation, and would have known that it was responsible for reproducing his list in its printed debates. But Spring Rice's list does not derive from Hansard's (or indeed Hansard's from Spring Rice's). He did not count the committees on contested elections, for example, whereas the *Catalogue and breviat* lists fourteen. He must have been aware of these committees, since it was a select committee that decided the result of the general election of 1820 in Limerick which made Spring Rice an MP to begin with (Pl. I)! The two lists of reports on economic improvements also differ—Spring Rice cites a report on Dunmore Harbour, Co. Waterford, which is not in the *Catalogue and breviat*, but misses those on Ardglass and Howth harbours, which are. It is more than likely that Spring Rice's list was the result of some hasty combing of shelves in his own or some other member's private house or in the House of Commons.

For the number of commissions, a quick look at Spring Rice's speech explains the figure of 114. In the first place, what he was counting was the number of reports rather than the number of commissions. Thus he counted the Commissioners of Roads and Bridges—which produced six reports between 1826 and 1831—as six rather than as one; likewise for courts of justice (16), prisons (8), education (12) and so on. This is quite explicit in both the account quoted above, in the Hansard report of the debate and in contemporary newspaper accounts. In the second place, Spring Rice used a wide definition of a commission. Some of those listed by Spring Rice were not investigative bodies as such, that is to say not specially established Royal Commissions, but semi-permanent bodies producing annual reports. This is true, for example, of the various commissions on public accounts, which make up 20 of Spring Rice's 114 total. The regular hum of administrative machinery, in other words, was represented by Spring Rice, and has been accepted by historians, as a major fact-finding initiative.

¹² I give the version as printed in *Repeal of the union: a report of the debate in the House of Commons on Mr. O'Connell's motion* (London 1834), 47, rather than that in Hansard, which lists every single one of the 175 reports. I think it is likely that the long list was added later, rather than read out by Spring Rice.

¹³ National Library of Ireland, Monteagle papers, MS. 13,365. These are Spring Rice's notes or drafts for speeches in parliament 1820–66. Spring Rice became Lord Monteagle in 1839.



PL. I—*The Chairing of Thomas Spring Rice, MP* by William Turner, 1820. Courtesy of the Limerick Chamber of Commerce.

Spring Rice was also a little disingenuous about the scope of the reports, claiming that they were all ‘inquiring into the condition of Ireland’. Some of them were rather more restricted than this suggests. The 1821 commission on Dunmore Harbour consisted entirely of two brief reports, a page and a half altogether in length, by the engineers Thomas Telford and Alexander Nimmo on the deepening of the harbour (the works were proceeding satisfactorily, but the harbour needed a hotel for passengers).

It would be unfair to criticise Spring Rice for these misrepresentations. He was making an intervention in a debate, and attempting to answer one of the most powerful orators in the Commons. In any case, he may not have attached too much importance to his list of commissions and committees, and it is omitted from the pamphlet version of the speech, which was printed in Dublin in 1834. Most of his contemporaries did not either, and the figures are not mentioned in O’Connell’s correspondence or in the series of articles replying to the speech,

which appeared in the pro-repeal *Morning Register* and were also issued as a pamphlet.¹⁴

What is extraordinary, however, is how rapidly a serious misreading of Spring Rice's speech became accepted within Irish political and historical discourse, and how historians have perpetuated this misreading to the present. At the time, none of Spring Rice's opponents questioned the figures, and indeed one of them may well have created the misreading himself. This was Feargus O'Connor, one of the pro-repeal speakers who followed Spring Rice in the 1834 debate. In his speech, the equation of reports and commissions has already been accepted and the trope established:

They had been told that since the Union there had been 61 committees and 114 commissions appointed to inquire into Irish affairs, but the result of all these had not been related. What had they succeeded in doing for the actual relief of Ireland?¹⁵

The figures were in common use in political literature of all shades of opinion by the 1840s. They occur for example in a pamphlet of 1841, which urged the new MP for St Albans, Lord Listowel, to support repeal of the Act of Union, where they are directly attributed to Lord Monteagle, as Spring Rice had by then become. On the other side of this debate was *Ireland before and after the Union* (1843), a substantial book published at the height of the repeal agitation by Robert Montgomery Martin, a statistician of the British Empire, best remembered for his prediction that Hong Kong would never make a good trading post. Like Spring Rice, Martin was answering repeal petitions directly and countering them with arguments about Ireland's prosperity based on statistics. He did not attribute the figures on reports directly to Spring Rice, but given that he had quoted at length from the latter's 1834 speech earlier in the book and that he gave the same list of reports, this was almost certainly his source. Writers on other Irish subjects used the figures also, such as John Wiggins, a land agent who published a study of the land question broadly favourable to tenants in 1844, and who cites Martin as his source.¹⁶

By the early twentieth century, the figures had passed into history books, one of the most significant being Geoffrey Locker Lampson's *Consideration of the state of Ireland in the nineteenth century* (1907), which long remained a basic text on

¹⁴ Thomas Spring Rice, *Repeal of the Union: speech of the Right Honourable Thomas Spring Rice ... 11 February 1833* (Dublin, 1833); *Answer to the speech, delivered in the last session of parliament by ... T.S. Rice, M.P., on the repeal of the legislative union between Great Britain and Ireland* (Dublin, 1834).

¹⁵ This is in the report of O'Connor's speech in *Repeal of the Union: a report of the debate* (see note 12 above), 110. The Hansard version does not contain the figures.

¹⁶ 'Joint of the tail', *'What will the Irish Lords do?': a letter to the Earl of Listowel* (London, 1841), 10–11; R. Montgomery Martin, *Ireland before and after the Union* (London 1843), 271–2; John Wiggins, *The 'monster' misery of Ireland: a practical treatise on the relation of landlord and tenant* (London, 1844), 164.

nineteenth-century Ireland. Even more influential was George O'Brien's *Economic history of Ireland from the Union to the Famine*, published in 1921:

Between 1800 and 1833 no less than 114 commissions and 60 select committees had investigated the state of Ireland, but in spite of all this inquiry, very little was done in the way of actual remedial measures.¹⁷

O'Brien's economic critique of the Union was written against the background of the War of Independence, and was the only general economic history of the period available for decades, giving it an enormous influence. It is probably the source for most of the later books, which quote the figures, along with the phrase 'no less than', and which O'Brien may have taken from Wiggins. O'Brien was an important source for Pomfret's *Struggle for land*, for example, and the latter's non-existent source is almost certainly a misreading of O'Brien's footnote presented as an original note by Pomfret, since he mistakenly credits Scrope with the text *Ireland before and after the Union*, which is correctly attributed by O'Brien to Martin and includes the same page reference. For the most part, as in Pomfret's book, O'Brien is not cited directly, and the numbers seem to have become common currency. One exception in this regard is Salaman's classic history of the potato, according to which 'George O'Brien points out that in the first thirty-one [*sic*] years of the century, parliament had appointed no less than one hundred and fourteen commissions and sixty-one committees to report on Irish affairs'.¹⁸

If O'Brien is one main source for later writers' use of the numbers, Woodward's *Age of reform* is the other. Indeed the genealogies can be traced through the use of the different dates mentioned above—O'Brien gives 1800 to 1833, while Woodward gives 1810 to 1833. Woodward's use of 1810 rather than 1800 is difficult to explain, as there is nothing in Spring Rice's speech to justify it. I suspect it is accidental; either the result of there being a page break at 1810 in the list of reports in the Hansard printed debates, or else a misprint for 1801, the date of the first report listed. In any case, our other dead end trail of citations, from Deane through Mansergh, both of whom refer to 1810 rather than 1800 or 1801, therefore turns out in the end to lead to Woodward. Mansergh's *Irish question*, published in 1965, is a revised version of his *Ireland in the age of reform and revolution* (1940). In these books, the statement of the numbers of commissions and committees is preceded by the same quotation from Nassau Senior as precedes them in Woodward. While it is conceivable that Woodward was paraphrasing Mansergh, who was a historian of Ireland, it is more likely that the reverse was the case. Firstly, Woodward's book was published two years before Mansergh's, and secondly, Woodward supplies the original source of the numbers whereas Mansergh does not. If this is the case, then

¹⁷ Geoffrey Locker Lampson, *A consideration of the state of Ireland in the nineteenth century* (London, 1907), 205; George O'Brien, *Economic history of Ireland from the Union to the Famine* (Dublin, 1921), 147.

¹⁸ Redcliffe Salaman, *The history and social influence of the potato* (Cambridge, 1949; Cambridge, 1985 edn), 288.

there is something of an irony in an Irish historian of Ireland taking his discussion of the supposed British ignorance of Ireland directly from a general history of England (without attribution) rather than basing it on sources relating to Ireland!

Use of the figures

The cases of Mansergh and Pomfret in particular show a certain level of carelessness and lack of critical spirit, but the same can be said, *mutatis mutandis*, of most of the writers who cite this largely mythical collection of state information. A few aspects of these citations are worth remarking on. The first is the implied respect for the figures of 114 and 60. We are given to understand that somebody went to the trouble of counting the reports thoroughly. Occasionally, a rudimentary quantitative approach is carried further—when Eric Strauss’ cogent 1952 Marxist survey of Irish history claimed that ‘the average number of Parliamentary committees or commissions of inquiry into the state of Ireland was in the neighbourhood of five every year, at least during the first half of the nineteenth century’, he was clearly adding 114 and 60 and dividing by 33.¹⁹ Mostly, though, the logic of quantity is not followed through, and none of those who use the figures tries to estimate whether 114 or 60 (even if accurate) are in fact significant amounts in this context. What if there had been 200 commissions on Wales or Scotland? The surface rhetoric of the assertions is quantitative, in other words, but the underlying argument is not so at all, and the reader is left to be impressed by the magic of numbers themselves.

The next remarkable feature is the silent and illegitimate expansion of the subjects of those reports, begun, as we saw, by Spring Rice and O’Connor, but continued in the secondary literature. A plural is used by McIntyre (‘Irish problems’), Mansergh (‘Irish affairs’) and E.R. Norman (‘Irish questions’) but a much more comprehensive singular (‘the state of Ireland’) is preferred by O’Brien, Pomfret, Woodham-Smith and Strauss, suggesting that all of the commissions and committees were investigating a single phenomenon. That singular becomes even more specific in the case of Janet Nolan, who presents all the inquiries as being into ‘the growing economic crisis’, and Berresford Ellis, for whom they are all about rural unrest:

The peasant warfare was such a thorn in the side of the administration that between 1800 and 1833 no less than 114 parliamentary commissions and sixty select committees were established to investigate conditions provoking this agitation.²⁰

Finally, what is perhaps most remarkable is the sheer carelessness with which the numbers are repeated from writer to writer, along with the implied criticism of government or authority for not paying sufficient attention to the commissions and their reports. This could be construed as a clear case of transference—nineteenth-century politicians and administrators are criticised by historians for failing to make a thorough

¹⁹ Eric Strauss, *Irish nationalism and British democracy* (London, 1952), 80.

²⁰ Berresford Ellis, *Irish working class*, 98.

examination of the reports, but if those historians had examined these documents themselves with any care, they would have realised that those reports, in the quantity and quality they assumed, do not exist.

At this stage, it should be pointed out that those scholars who specialised in Irish administrative history of the early nineteenth century nowhere mention these numbers or give the impression that they would credit them. Here I have in mind the fundamental works of R.B. McDowell, Oliver McDonagh, Gearóid Ó Tuathaigh and Peter Jupp. Despite this, the figures continue to be repeated, in books as varied in their style and politics as Liz Curtis' nationalist *The cause of Ireland* and Paul Bew's liberal unionist *The politics of enmity*, as well as in a recent study by K. Theodore Hoppen of the incorporation (or lack thereof) of Ireland into the United Kingdom after 1800.²¹

Recently, the figure has resurfaced in discussions of the development of the Irish state from a comparative post-colonial standpoint. While the numbers are not quoted, it is clearly intended in the formulation of David Lloyd in his influential study of James Clarence Mangan:

The anomalous condition of Ireland within Great Britain ... [led to] a pattern of deliberate state interference which long predated any comparable developments in other parts of the British Isles. This development is signalled not only by the number of committees and commissions established to research Irish affairs, but by the establishment of a state-organised national school system, a national police force ...²²

The view here is that Ireland was precociously modern in its forms of government, a theme that has come to prominence in recent post-colonial writing on Ireland such as Lloyd's. It had been colonised early, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and then was suddenly and brutally commercialised in the later seventeenth century. According to Luke Gibbons:

Irish society did not have to await the twentieth century to undergo the shock of modernity: disintegration and fragmentation were already part of its history ... Irish culture experienced modernity before its time.²³

²¹ R.B. McDowell, *Public opinion and government policy in Ireland 1801–1846* (London, 1952) and *The Irish administration 1801–1914* (London and Toronto, 1964); Oliver McDonagh, *Ireland: the Union and its aftermath* (London, 1977) and *Early Victorian government* (London, 1977); Gearóid Ó Tuathaigh, *Ireland before the Famine* (Dublin, 1972) and *Thomas Drummond and the government of Ireland 1835–41* (Dublin, 1977); Jupp, 'Government'; Liz Curtis, *The cause of Ireland: from the United Irishmen to partition* (Belfast, 1994), 20; Paul Bew, *Ireland: the politics of enmity 1786–2006* (Oxford, 2007), 559; K. Theodore Hoppen, 'An incorporating Union? British politicians and Ireland 1800–1830', *English Historical Review* CXXIII (2008), 328–50.

²² David Lloyd, *Nationalism and minor literature* (Berkeley, CA, 1987).

²³ Luke Gibbons, *Transformations in Irish culture* (Cork, 1996), 6.

In this context, it is appealing to think of Ireland as also being suddenly subject to modern forms of state intervention and surveillance in the early nineteenth century. An ebulliently Foucaultesque statement in this vein comes from Kevin Whelan, writing about the Act of Union:

Between 1810 and 1833, the parliamentary system generated a paper panopticon on Ireland with 114 commissions and 60 select committees sitting on Irish issues.²⁴

Much information,
little action

These recent uses of the figures indicate the sheer durability of the trope of 114 commissions as well as the fact that it is shared by all shades of political opinion. What is it about such an incredible statistic that makes it so durable? One reason could be the growth of information- and inquiry-based government in the early nineteenth century, in the United Kingdom and elsewhere. A plethora of studies has made us aware of the growth of statistical societies and of parliamentary investigation in Britain, the development of Napoleonic administrative inquiries, social medicine, and the ideology of ‘liberal governance’ in general.²⁵

In this context, it is also worth pointing out that such exaggerations of the scale of information are not limited to historians of Ireland. In her history of social surveys in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in the United Kingdom, Eileen Yeo performs the same inflation of numbers and distortion of content:

Under Chadwick’s watchful eye, between 1832 and 1846 over 100 Royal Commissions inquired into such key issues as the condition of women and children in various industries and the health of towns.

In fact, about 70 Royal Commissions were established in these years, and while they included some landmark inquiries into factories, child labour, mining and disease, the vast majority were on unrelated subjects. These included St Helena, Canada, fine

²⁴ Kevin Whelan, ‘The other within: Ireland, Britain and the Act of Union’, in Dáire Keogh and Kevin Whelan (eds), *Acts of Union: the causes, contexts, and consequences of the Act of Union* (Dublin, 2001), 13–33, 24.

²⁵ A few examples among many: Stuart Woolf, ‘Statistics and the modern state’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 31 (1989), 588–604; Jean-Claude Perrot and Stuart Woolf, *State and statistics in France 1789–1815* (Paris, 1984); Marie-Noëlle Bourguet, *Deciffrer la France: La statistique départementale à l’époque napoléonienne* (Paris, 1988); Eric Brian, *La mesure de l’État: administrateurs et géomètres au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, 1994); William Coleman, *Death is a social disease: public health and political economy in early industrial France* (Madison, WI, 1982); Silvana Patriarca, *Numbers and nationhood: writing statistics in nineteenth-century Italy* (Cambridge, 1996); Edward Higgs, *The information state in England: the central collection of information on citizens since 1500* (London, 2003); M.J. Cullen, *The statistical movement in early Victorian Britain: the foundation of empirical social research* (Hassocks, 1975); David Eastwood, ‘“Amplifying the province of the legislature”: The flow of information and the English state in the early nineteenth century’, *Historical Research* LXII (1989), 98–121.

arts, slave compensation, Scottish universities, military punishments and Dunmore Harbour, Co. Waterford.²⁶

In the development of information-based government, it is only to be expected that Ireland followed suit. There is an implication in many of the books cited, however, that Ireland was exceptional in this regard. According to Melissa Fegan's *Literature and the Irish Famine*:

In an age obsessed with statistics, nothing was analysed with such fervour as the Irish question. From the end of the Napoleonic wars until the Famine, the government scrutinized Irish poverty, setting up select committees in 1819, 1823, 1829 and 1833, filling innumerable Blue Books with impenetrable statistics.

Or again, in Alan J. Ward's study of the background to the Northern Irish question:

Irish exceptionalism created an enormous amount of extra work for the United Kingdom Parliament. For example, more than one hundred commissions and sixty-one parliamentary committees investigated Irish problems, and in the parliamentary session of 1823 alone forty-nine of eighty-four business days were devoted to Irish subjects.

(This latter figure, incidentally, is also an exaggeration, based on a speech in parliament by a presumably exasperated Robert Peel in June 1823 at the height of the violent Rockite disturbances in Munster. Irish issues took up about a third of the time in that session, as measured by columns in Hansard.)²⁷

Ireland's exceptionalism seems in these accounts also to comprehend a dysfunctional relationship between information and policy. Almost all of the writers who emphasise the amount of information collected are equally emphatic that it did not result in effective policy, from Feargus O'Connor's, 'What had they succeeded in doing for the actual relief of Ireland?', through Locker Lampson's, 'Sixty Select Committees and 114 Commissions had been appointed on matters relating to Ireland, and what had they all led to?', to George O'Brien's, 'in spite of all this inquiry, very little was done in the way of actual remedial measures'.

They explain this by suggesting that the information which parliament collected was either not read or not understood, and that English administrators remained ignorant of Ireland. The argument goes as follows: there was a crisis; the government

²⁶ Eileen Janes Yeo, 'Social surveys in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries', in Theodore Porter and Dorothy Ross (eds), *The Cambridge history of science Vol. 7. The modern social sciences* (Cambridge, 2003), 83–99, quote on 92; Clokie and Robinson, *Royal Commissions*, 76–7.

²⁷ Melissa Fegan, *Literature and the Irish Famine 1845–1849* (Oxford, 2002), 74–5; Alan J. Ward, 'A constitutional background to the Northern Ireland crisis', in Dermot Keogh and Michael Halzel (eds), *Northern Ireland and the politics of reconciliation* (Cambridge, 1993), 33–51, quote on 36.

did nothing about it; this is because they were ignorant of Ireland; but this ignorance somehow coexisted with a plethora of official knowledge about the country, or indeed an obsession with it. It is based on the assumption that there was an unusually large amount of information on Ireland, and is usually copper-fastened by reference to the 114 commissions. A belief in a non-existent flood of information is combined with a straightforward acceptance of an ideology of enlightened governance ('reliable information will lead to effective policy') to produce a pseudoproblem ('why did this not happen?'). The solutions adopted to resolve this problem are revealing about historians' presuppositions in regard to Anglo-Irish relations and to the nature and development of modern, information-based government.

There was, of course, one influential writer who took the contrary view, that is, that parliamentary information did inform policy, and in a very direct way. This was John Mitchel, who presented the government as deliberately allowing a population loss during the Great Famine that corresponded exactly to earlier estimates of overpopulation by the Poor Inquiry and the Devon Commission, and that it had been waiting since those investigations for just such an opportunity. Mitchel's putative genocide, in other words, was the direct result of parliamentary investigation and action.²⁸

Mitchel's example has not been followed. Most historians attempt to provide an explanation for this apparent disjunction between information and policy. Brian Jenkins and Janet Nolan, for example, suggest that British governments in this period were too divided on Irish issues to pursue a coherent policy, and that governments could only be formed by not having a specific Irish policy. These divisions, however, are not presented as an obstacle to procuring supposedly vast amounts of printed information. In fact, one might expand the argument into the proposition that the collection of information was in fact a substitute for action and policy rather than a prelude to it. This argument is a plausible one, and the commissioning of parliamentary inquiries in order to postpone decisions is not limited to Ireland or indeed to Britain.²⁹

All of the other solutions are vastly more problematic. The first is to suggest that it was precisely the enormity of the information collected which was itself the difficulty. According to Brian Jenkins again:

neither the Home Office nor that of the Chief Secretary possessed the personnel to comb the parliamentary papers for the wealth of evidence they contained, and then to correlate it.

²⁸ John Mitchel, *The last conquest of Ireland (perhaps)* (Dublin, 1861) and *The History of Ireland, from the treaty of Limerick to the present time* (Dublin, London, 1868).

²⁹ Despite the weight he gave to commissions and committees, even Spring Rice himself was well aware of this. When moving for a select committee on education in 1828, he stated that 'There was nothing more common in parliamentary tactics, than to get rid of a troublesome question by moving for a commission. ... [Spring Rice] thought this plan objectionable, and seldom productive of any other result than the getting rid of the question'. So much for the 114 commissions! *Hansard*, N.S. (*Commons*), vol. XVIII, 1119–1120 (11 March 1828).

McIntyre makes a similar observation, extended in this case to public opinion at large:

Official concern was clearly reflected in the 114 Commissions and 60 Select Committees which investigated Irish problems between 1810 and 1833; but these detailed inquiries into particular problems, issuing forth in unwieldy and indigestible Reports of strictly limited circulation, did little to increase knowledge of, or interest in, Ireland.³⁰

One can understand the appeal of this argument to political and administrative historians such as Jenkins and McIntyre, whose research entailed reading not only parliamentary papers but also newspapers and correspondence, both private and official, in industrial quantities. It was also expressed occasionally by overworked members of government or parliament in the nineteenth century. George Cornwall Lewis told a select committee on printing in 1847 that:

In some cases I apprehend that the bulk of the evidence taken by Commissioners of Inquiry is so great as almost to deter any ordinary reader; in illustration I would refer to the evidence taken by the Commission to inquire into the tenure of land in Ireland, which was presided over by Lord Devon; the bulk of the evidence taken by that commission was enormous, and I should think that hardly any person could have attempted, without devoting a very large portion of time, to master any considerable part of it. I would make the same remark with respect to the Commissions of Inquiry into the English Poor Law, the Irish Poor Law, and the Scotch Poor Law.³¹

This solution does not work, however, for two reasons. Firstly, it dismisses parliamentary investigation as a force for policy in all areas and on all issues, since reports on Ireland did not differ in format from those on Great Britain or the United Kingdom as a whole, as indeed is clear from Cornwall Lewis's observations. In fact, as Asa Briggs put it, 'almost every major piece of social legislation introduced between 1832 and 1867 was preceded by this type of investigation'.³² Secondly, neither the public nor the members of parliament were compelled to read these reports in their original form. Most substantial parliamentary reports were excerpted and summarised in newspapers and in pamphlets in the aftermath of their official publication.

A different solution is proposed by Woodward, and can be characterised as a form of radical empiricism. According to Woodward, 'The facts of unrest were known, but this information was at second hand. Few people travelled in Ireland and saw Irish conditions for themselves'. Mansergh followed Woodward closely in this respect also, down to the casually elitist use of 'people':

The accumulation of evidence of distress was in itself valueless. It afforded no more than the foundation on which to base the positive reforms which the

³⁰ Jenkins, *Era of Emancipation*, 303; McIntyre, *The Liberator*, 167.

³¹ *Select Committee on Printing*, 1st report P.P. (1847–8), vol. XVI, 29.

³² Asa Briggs, *The age of improvement* (London, 1959), 275.

state of Ireland so urgently demanded. An intimate personal knowledge of the country was essential both to inspire and to carry such a policy to success. But it was just this personal knowledge that was so unhappily absent. The reason was quite simply that very few people ever visited Ireland.

That was written in 1940. Mansergh drew the contrast between reading and direct experience even more strongly in 1965: ‘Where the one may prompt discussion, the other alone is likely to stimulate action’.³³

The logical and practical difficulties of this solution make it almost incoherent. Who exactly should get this personal experience? Should it be the government, all members of parliament, the entire British public? And what should the spatio-temporal extent of that experience be? Would ten days be sufficient, would ten weeks or even ten months? Would ten months’ experience of Munster entitle one to legislate for Ulster, and vice versa? Does the same argument apply to Cornwall, Lincolnshire, Yorkshire or the Scottish highlands? (There is also a temptation to turn this argument on those who make it, since it is clear that their knowledge of the 114 commissions comes at second hand and emphatically not from personal experience!)

One irony of this explanation is that it was precisely the principle of direct personal experience that produced the longest (and supposedly least digestible) parliamentary reports on Ireland, such as the Poor Inquiry and the Devon Commission. For the former, teams of investigators travelled throughout Ireland for almost two years, amassing vast amounts of opinion and information at first hand. The proposals put forward in the report of this commission did not appeal to the government of the time, however, and their response was to send a single new commissioner to Ireland for six weeks to produce a report which would make more palatable suggestions. This new commissioner, George Nicholls, began his 1837 report with exactly the same observation as Woodward and Mansergh:

I soon became satisfied, that it is only by a personal inspection, that the condition of the Irish people can be accurately known. A general, and a tolerably correct, notion of the state of the country may be gained, by an examination of Reports and Evidence: and deductions, pretty accurate in the main, may be drawn therefrom; but to arrive at definite and practical views, a personal inspection of the country is, I think, necessary.³⁴

This credo is beset with the same contradictions as the later historians’ views. Nicholls rejected the results of the minute and painstaking first-hand investigation undertaken by an entire team of Poor Inquiry personnel in favour of those of a quick individual trip, and this in the name of experience. At the same time he argued that personal inspection should be privileged over the reading of reports while himself being engaged in compiling his own report, which policymakers would, perhaps,

³³ Woodward, *The age of reform*, 335; Nicholas Mansergh, *Ireland in the age of reform and revolution* (London, 1940), 19; and *The Irish question* (London, 1965), 49.

³⁴ Report of Geo. Nicholls ... on Poor Laws, Ireland, *Hansard (Commons)*, vol. LI, 4.

read. In any case, the fate of Nicholls' report in later historiography is also ironic, since it is usually compared unfavourably with the Poor Inquiry, precisely on the grounds of Nicholls' lack of personal experience and understanding of Ireland.

The third type of solution is implicit in the formulation of Seamus Deane, that despite the existence of Irish fiction, Irish political writing and parliamentary reports, the English public—presumably including the members of parliament—'remained invincibly ignorant' of Ireland's circumstances and history. Invincible ignorance is a concept in Catholic theology, which in effect absolves those who have committed sinful acts from the sin itself, but this connotation is probably not intended by Deane. Rather he is suggesting that English opinion misunderstood comprehensively or even rejected any knowledge about Ireland. This has become one of the standard motifs of the literary and cultural history of Ireland, particularly when written from a post-colonial standpoint. Since Edmund Spenser, or perhaps even Giraldus Cambrensis, English power has systematically and dangerously misread Irish conditions.

In the case of parliamentary investigation, the case is difficult to prove. Leaving aside the inflation of the amount of that investigation, the evidence for the lack of understanding is essentially the lack of action and implementation of effective measures relating to Ireland. This produces a circular argument: misunderstanding is held to have resulted in a lack of action, but the evidence for that misunderstanding is in fact the lack of action. Moreover, if the ignorance of the English public was ever to be overcome, then publicising the result of official investigations would be a good starting point.

These three positions represent different degrees of possibility (or impossibility) for information-based government. For Jenkins and McIntyre, rulers and the public did not bother reading reports of any kind due to their length. Beyond a certain point, therefore, information inhibited government, or at least ceased having any effect on it. For Woodward and Mansergh, even if reports were read, they could not give an understanding of places or problems that were physically or culturally distant from the seat of government. These had to be experienced directly. Finally, for Deane, Britain's rulers and public may have read reports about Ireland but their specific national preconceptions prevented them from understanding or acting on them. What all three positions share is the conception of official information as being irrelevant to the government of Ireland. It does not matter therefore whether there were 14, 114 or even 214 commissions, since they had no effect. This partly explains the readiness with which the figure of 114 has been accepted.

Conclusion: the paradox of the 114 commissions

The deployment of the motif of 114 commissions rests ultimately on a contradiction or paradox. The supposed vast collection of information was a sign of a heightened interest in Ireland, and is therefore very significant. At the same time, it had no effect on either policy or public opinion, and is therefore very insignificant. This same observation can be framed within a broader characterisation of nineteenth-century state reports as a whole. On the one hand, parliamentary committees and Royal Commissions represent a huge project of exploration and surveillance of the territory and people of the state. On the other hand, they were also a massive publishing enterprise, circulating a representation of that territory and people that would

shape public discourse and ultimately help to legitimise the state. Public opinion was shaped not just by the reports, but by the myriad ways in which extracts and digests of the reports appeared as pamphlets and in newspapers. Those who maintain that there were 114 commissions have hugely inflated the first aspect of government inquiry; they are then forced to explain why there was not a corresponding inflation in the second aspect.

Writers who postulate such a disjunction between information on the one hand and public opinion and policy on the other would also seem to be committing themselves to the view that Anglo-Irish relations are somehow static and primordial, or at least that the terms of the political debate over the Union were not much changed by the accumulation and dissemination of information. Such a view is certainly not hard to find in both nationalist and unionist historiography over the last century or more. Moreover, at first sight, the continued repetition of the figure of 114 commissions over that period would itself be indicative of such a stasis. Among critics of the Union, for example, the statement of Feargus O'Connor is more or less identical to that of George O'Brien nearly a century later, and to others more recently still. In fact the idea they expressed was in circulation even before the debate in 1834. For one commentator in 1831:

The neglect of Ireland in the Imperial Parliament amounts to a violation of the constitutional trusts delegated by the nations. Year after year from 1800 the sufferings of Ireland were made known, and remedies were devised, but never adopted.³⁵

There was, however, a pronounced shift over the same period among those more favourable to the Union. For Spring Rice, the number of reports signified that London was well-informed, and he deployed them to counter charges of neglect of Ireland through ignorance. By the time Woodward and Mansergh were writing, in diametric contrast, London's policy failures in Ireland were being explained precisely by ignorance of Irish conditions. The existence of 114 commissions, however, was well established in both the pro- and anti-Union historiography, and therefore needed to be explained away. This is explicit in Mansergh's first formulation in 1940:

To Irishmen the misrule of their country seemed due to the malignant will of its conquerors. The truth is quite different. It was almost entirely due to ignorance ... What was the cause of this ignorance of Irish problems and of the Irish outlook? It was certainly not from lack of official information. Between 1810 and 1833 Parliament appointed 114 commissions and 60 select committees to investigate Irish affairs, in addition to the long hours spent in debate in the house.

It is even clearer in a short history of Anglo-Irish relations, which Mansergh published in 1942, when essentially the same argument is made immediately after

³⁵ Anon., *Commentaries on national policy and Ireland* (Dublin, 1831), 55.

a section on the Great Famine.³⁶ This placing of the argument of 114 commissions may well point to a corresponding shift in nationalist views. Ignorance of conditions in Ireland may have seemed like neglect before 1845, but took on an aura of malevolence afterwards.

The '114 commissions' may therefore have had different connotations in 1834 and in 1934, for both nationalists and unionists. The motif itself persisted, however, despite the remarkable absence of evidence for it, as did a range of associated implausible explanations. In this respect, the use of the motif is exemplary of the stasis in the political debate that it itself implies.

Ireland was in many ways precocious in the degree of state intervention in social and economic policy in the early nineteenth century, as well as in its mechanisms of order. The establishment of a national school system, a professional centralised police force and a state investment board are all well known since the studies of McDonagh and others. But it was not precocious in the amount of investigation or information-gathering, and these were at much the same level as in the rest of the United Kingdom, and in some cases, such as the census or the Poor Inquiry, explicitly modelled on previous investigations in Britain. What may be exceptional, however, is the degree to which the existence of an implausible level of investigation of Ireland has been accepted and repeated for more than a century and a half.

³⁶ Mansergh, *Ireland*, 19; Nicholas Mansergh, *Britain and Ireland* (London, 1942), 36.