

ARTICLE

Irish-American Anti-Imperialism in Patrick Ford's *The Criminal History of the British Empire*

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Abstract

In 1881, Patrick Ford, the Irish-American nationalist editor of the New York Irish newspaper *The Irish World and American Industrial Liberator*, published *The criminal history of the British empire*, a collection of five letters that he had written to William Gladstone. In *The criminal history*, Ford constructed a comprehensive account of British imperial history, beginning with England's conquest of Ireland, before detailing the colonization of North America, Britain's participation in the transatlantic slave trade, the American Revolution, British rule in India, the opium wars, and Britain's contemporary colonization of Africa. This article contributes to scholarship on American views of the British empire in the post-bellum United States. In exploring how Ford constructed a Manichean interpretation of world history, where the British imperial project devastated every region it invaded, the article analyses Ford's reasons for writing and publishing the letters that formed *The criminal history*. Finally, the article shows that Ford's central purpose was to foster a visceral hatred of the British empire among his Irish-American readership, to maintain a commitment to their ethnic heritage as proud Irish people, and to encourage his readers that a better future would soon arrive, when the British empire was finally a relic of the past.

I

In 1915, the recently deceased Irish nationalist, labor agitator, and editor of the *Irish World and American Industrial Liberator*, Patrick Ford (1837–1913), was eulogized as the embodiment of 'the struggle for Irish liberty, which engaged him through all the mature years of his life, from the establishment of The Irish World in 1870, until his death in 1913'. Ford waged a 'great controversy' against 'the enemies of his native country and of the aspirations of her people'. These statements came in the preface to a reprint of a text Ford had published three decades earlier, *The criminal history of the British empire: a series of open letters to Hon. Wm. E. Gladstone*. The preface described the text of *The criminal history* as 'a

memorial of his personal worth, his enthusiastic patriotism, and his single-hearted devotion to a great cause'.¹ *The criminal history* was a summary of Ford's views on Ireland, the United States, and the British empire. Niall Whelehan has noted that Ford is a figure who 'weaves in and out of broader works on Irish-American nationalism but rarely seems to merit specific study'.² This article, through a close reading of *The criminal history of the British empire*, provides a corrective to this relative inattention.

In 1881, Ford published *The criminal history of the British empire*, a collection of five letters that he had written to William Gladstone, then in his second term as prime minister of the United Kingdom. In these letters, Ford presented his personal interpretation of the history of the British empire. Ranging from England's early conquest and subjugation of Ireland, the transatlantic slave trade, the colonization of the North American continent and the American Revolution, and the British conquest of India, to Britain's contemporary attempts to colonize Africa, Ford excoriated the British empire as an unparalleled force for evil.

Patrick Ford was one of the central Irish-American political figures in the second half of the nineteenth century.³ Born in 1837 in Galway, he came to the United States in 1845, served in the Union army during the American civil war, and settled in New York in 1870. He founded the *Irish World* in 1870; in 1878, so that it would also speak for the American labouring class, he changed the name of his paper to *The Irish World and American Industrial Liberator*. From the first edition, 'Patrick Ford made The Irish World the scourge of the enemies of the Irish cause', and 'rallied its friends to united and sustained effort'.⁴ A lifelong supporter of Irish independence, he, along with Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, was a founding contributor to the Skirmishing Fund, a campaign to raise money for a bombing campaign in Britain. Furthermore, in the 1880s Ford endorsed a radical interpretation of land reform during the Irish Land War. As David Brundage has noted, 'Irish-American workers gravitated to Ford's position' for two reasons. Firstly, 'it fit well with the political outlook many had developed in Ireland itself, for it combined an attack on landlords (the ultimate "non-producers") with a denunciation of non republican political forms, such as that represented by England's domination of Ireland'. Secondly, 'Ford's labor republicanism appealed to Irish American workers as workers, for it helped make sense of their often harsh experiences in the workplaces and neighborhoods of urban industrial America'.⁵ By the later 1870s, Ford would become a committed critic

¹ Patrick Ford, *The criminal history of the British empire* (New York, NY, 1915), preface, p. 1.

² Niall Whelehan, 'Skirmishing, the Irish world, and empire, 1876–86', *Éire-Ireland*, 42 (2007), pp. 180–200, at p. 183.

³ The only major biography of Ford remains James Paul Rodechko, *Patrick Ford and his search for America: a case study of Irish-American journalism, 1870–1913* (New York, NY, 1976).

⁴ Ford, *Criminal history*, preface, p. 1.

⁵ David Brundage, 'After the Land League: the persistence of Irish-American labor radicalism in Denver, 1897–1905', *Journal of American Ethnic History*, 11, no. 3 (1992), pp. 3–26, at p. 4. For further work, see Eric Foner, 'Class, ethnicity, and radicalism in the gilded age: the Land League and Irish-America', in *Politics and ideology in the age of the civil war* (New York, NY, 1980), pp. 150–200;

of American anti-Black racism, and a limited critic of American Indian policy. His commitment to Ireland contributed significantly to his views on the labour and race questions in the United States, all coalescing together in a liberationist, interventionist ideological outlook.⁶

However, Ford's status as a popular historian of Ireland and the British empire – an analyst of the historical basis of Ireland's dispossession within the British empire and the wider history of British imperialism – has been insufficiently recognized. He published *The criminal history* at the height of his career as a 'culture broker' for Irish Americans.⁷ A core component of his appeal to his readers was his ability to synthesize multiple historical phenomena into a simplified, Manichean narrative of British imperial cruelty and its victims. Ford was a talented commentator on the dynamics of imperial coercion that underlay world history, which he dated from the first conquest of Ireland by the English in 1169. Furthermore, he was a radical proponent of a futural vision that was dislocated from the principles of coercion, Anglo-Saxonism, and the hegemony of oligarchic imperialists at the expense of subjugated communities. Instead, he hoped for a future defined by communal solidarity, and an end to imperial violence.⁸

Within a few years of the publication of *The criminal history*, the *Irish World's* circulation reached 100,000; Ford's message had a receptive, ever-growing audience.⁹ Ford wanted these letters to educate his Irish readership about their history, to inculcate a sense of Irishness and an understanding that Britain deserved their condemnation, and to inspire a belief that a better future was imminent. His letters were consistent with the articles of the *Irish World* throughout his life; he constructed a Manichean interpretation of Irish history, in which Celtic Irish Catholics were subjugated by an Anglo-Saxonist imperial project that was justified by a perverse civilizing agenda.

Ford's *Criminal history* is an important text, not only for historians of Ireland and Irish-American nationalism, but more generally for scholarship on imperialism and the emergence of an anti-imperialist discourse in the late nineteenth century. His letters show that the late 1870s and early 1880s were the beginning of a new phase in the era of high imperialism. With the British empire

Niall Whelehan, *The dynamiters: Irish nationalism and political violence in the wider world, 1867–1900* (Cambridge, 2012).

⁶ Cian T. McMahon, *The global dimensions of Irish identity: race, nation, and the popular press, 1840–1880* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2015); Brian Shott, *Mediating America: Black and Irish press and the struggle for citizenship, 1870–1914* (Philadelphia, PA, 2019). Numerous scholars have explored Ford's significance to the transatlantic Irish world: see Kevin Kenny, *The American Irish: a history* (London, 2000); Bruce Nelson, *Irish nationalists and the making of the Irish race* (Princeton, NJ, 2012).

⁷ For the notion of 'culture broker', see John Belchem, *Irish, catholic and scouse: the history of the Liverpool Irish, 1800–1939* (Liverpool, 2007).

⁸ While known to scholars of Irish-American nationalism, the text as a whole has not been adequately studied as a creative, crafted reflection on Ireland's place within a broader narrative of global imperialism. Whelehan, *The dynamiters*; Ely M. Janis, *A greater Ireland: the Land League and transatlantic nationalism in gilded age America* (Madison, WI, 2015).

⁹ George P. Rowell, *American newspaper directory* (New York, NY, 1879), p. 238; Edwin Alden, *American newspaper catalogue* (Cincinnati, OH, 1884), pp. 224, 438.

approaching its widest geographical extent, the centre began to fray; Ford's work was but one of many nascent anti-imperial critiques which developed across the British imperial world at this time.¹⁰ While Ford was not himself directly influenced by these parallel texts, his letters speak to the increasing importance of anti-imperialist critique to a new generation of political radicals across the British empire and the anglo-world, and to the increasing possibility of imagining a world divorced from the practice of imperialism.¹¹

This article also contributes to emerging scholarship on American opinions on imperialism in the late nineteenth century. In recent years, there has been significant historiographical debate over whether the United States should be considered an empire and, if so, whether the US became an empire before 1898 with its assumption of colonies in the Philippines.¹² Less attention has been given to American perceptions of other imperial structures in the same period; historians have not sufficiently interrogated how Americans understood and interpreted European imperialism, how ideas about imperialism in the later nineteenth century were produced, and how this production was inflected by political identification and ethnicity.¹³

Ford envisioned a post-imperial Irish nation-state as the means for the Irish to achieve an egalitarian, democratic, anti-imperial future, a future that was free from the hierarchies of oligarchic imperial capitalism. However, nation-building for Ireland was only a stage in his vision for a post-imperial future. That vision was a proto-form of 'world-making', an ideational, cultural construction of a shared horizon for the former subalterns of imperialism.¹⁴ In framing the future of the world as a historically inflected conflict between the oppressed and the oppressors, Ford's vision was for an emancipationist society. He operated in a world where empire was normative. However, he

¹⁰ For the emergence of these anticolonial viewpoints, see A. G. Hopkins, ed., *Globalization in world history* (London, 2011); Christopher A. Bayly, *The birth of the modern world, 1780–1914: global connections and comparisons* (London, 2004); Jennifer Pitts, *A turn to empire: the rise of liberal imperialism in Britain and France* (Princeton, NJ, 2005).

¹¹ Duncan Bell, *The idea of Greater Britain: empire and the future of world order, 1860–1900* (Princeton, NJ, 2007); James Belich, *Replenishing the earth: the settler revolution and the rise of the Angloworld* (Oxford, 2011).

¹² Julian Go, *Patterns of empire: the British and American empires, 1688 to the present* (Cambridge, 2011), pp. 1–54; Emily Conroy-Krutz, 'State of the field: empire and the early republic', *H-Diplo* essay no. 133 (10 Sept. 2015), <http://tiny.cc/E133>; David C. Hendrickson, *Union, nation, or empire: the American debate over international relations, 1789–1941* (Lawrence, KS, 2009); Paul A. Kramer, 'Empires, exceptions, and Anglo-Saxons: race and rule between the British and United States empires, 1880–1910', *Journal of American History*, 88 (2002), pp. 1315–53; Paul A. Kramer, 'Power and connection: imperial histories of the United States in the world', *American Historical Review*, 116 (2011), pp. 1348–91.

¹³ Karine V. Walther, *Sacred interests: the United States and the Islamic world, 1821–1921* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2015); James E. Lewis Jr, *The American Union and the problem of neighborhood: the United States and the collapse of the Spanish empire, 1783–1829* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2000); Jay Sexton, *The Monroe Doctrine: empire and nation in nineteenth-century America* (New York, NY, 2011); William N. Tilchin, 'The United States and the Boer War', in Keith Wilson, ed., *The international impact of the Boer War* (London, 2014), pp. 107–22.

¹⁴ Adom Getachew, *Worldmaking after empire: the rise and fall of self-determination* (Princeton, NJ, 2019).

singled out the British empire as the central spider in this wider imperial web. This system was reliant upon 'the race antipathies' that the British empire perpetuated. According to Ford, the British system was the model for other empires, as it had perfected the construction and imposition of racial hierarchies and coercive monopolistic visions of order on the world.¹⁵ If the British empire could fall, then exploitative imperial rule would fall universally.

II

The publication of *The criminal history* came at a significant moment in the history of Ireland and the Irish diaspora: the period of the Land War and the New Departure. This was the time when, as David Brundage has noted, 'the two principal strands of Irish nationalism, the constitutional (now focused on home rule) and the republican, came together for a brief time around a social reform programme that included labor rights in the United States and land reform in Ireland', before 'Charles Stewart Parnell steered Irish nationalism on both sides of the Atlantic in a more narrowly political direction'.¹⁶ After a decade of division between secessionist radical Irish nationalists and constitutional reformist nationalists, in 1879 a temporary truce was reached under the aegis of John Devoy of the Irish-American nationalist society Clan na Gael, a successor to the Fenian Brotherhood of the 1860s, and Charles Stewart Parnell of the Irish Parliamentary Party. Collectively, these groups united to campaign for home rule and land reform in Ireland.¹⁷ Devoy, hoping for 'a more radical land settlement' than the British had previously contemplated, believed that the New Departure would eventually lead to 'an independent Ireland'.¹⁸ Ford's text, along with contemporary works by Devoy, Michael Davitt, and James Joseph O'Kelly, was an attempt to comprehend and shape this emerging political situation.¹⁹

From its first edition, Ford's *Irish World* had promoted an active form of Irish nationalist resistance to British rule in Ireland, one that was willing to embrace violent means to achieve success. Niall Whelehan has noted that 'between 1875 and 1885 deliberate and unprecedented calls for the systematic use of dynamite and explosives became common in *The Irish World*'.²⁰ The Skirmishing Fund originated with Ford, formulated during a meeting at his Brooklyn home in the autumn of 1875, in consultation with his brother Augustine, O'Donovan Rossa, and John McCafferty. Ford's plan for skirmishing was consistent with his prediction for the future of the British empire and a post-imperial

¹⁵ Patrick Ford, *The criminal history of the British empire* (New York, NY, 1881), p. 5 (all subsequent citations are taken from this edition).

¹⁶ David Brundage, *Irish nationalists in America: the politics of exile, 1798–1998* (Oxford, 2016), p. 111.

¹⁷ R. V. Comerford, 'The Land War and the politics of distress, 1877–1882', in W. E. Vaughan, ed., *Ireland under the Union, 1870–1921* (Oxford, 1996), pp. 2, 33–4; Paul Bew, *Land and the national question, 1858–82* (Dublin, 1978); Andrew Phemister, *Land and liberalism: Henry George and the Irish Land War* (Cambridge, 2023).

¹⁸ *Gaelic American*, 30 June 1906.

¹⁹ Brundage, *Irish nationalists in America*, pp. 111–27.

²⁰ Whelehan, *The dynamiters*, p. 73.

world: skirmishing 'would hasten Irish independence, but would also be a means of destabilising Britain, toppling the government and inaugurating an "English Republic" too'.²¹ Describing the eighteenth-century penal laws in Ireland, Ford wrote that they had not been repealed because of English benevolence, 'for England has never granted any concession to Ireland that was not wrung from her through fear', but through 'the thunderbolt of the American Revolution that broke the first link in the galling chain'. Only through 'fears of insurrection' was Britain induced 'to repeal others of the penal laws'.²²

Ford understood the British empire as a system built on coercion, on the British capacity to inflict more destructive violence on their opponents than could be retaliated. He therefore believed that Irish Americans, with all the advantages of residing far from British coercion, 'must take the offensive! Action gives life, action gives health.'²³ He saw in the Skirmishing Fund the opportunity for 'heroic men' to 'carry on an irregular and incessant warfare against the enemy, – whilst the regular military organisations are preparing for heavier and more regular war'.²⁴ However, by 1881 the campaign had yet to materialize, as infighting within the Irish-American nationalist bloc had limited the campaign's capacity. As Ford penned *The criminal history*, his frustration at this inaction was countered by his continued hope that the British state would eventually have a taste of the violence it inflicted on the rest of the world.

On 16 August 1879, a group of activists founded the National Land League of Mayo, to encourage the local population to protest evictions and demand a change to agricultural conditions in Ireland.²⁵ Then, on 21 October, Irish reformers established the Irish National Land League in Dublin; Charles Stewart Parnell was announced as the president. As Eli Janis has noted, 'for the next three years the Land League agitation mobilized the Irish Catholic population to reform the Irish land system and to acquire "the land for the people"'.²⁶ The Land League mobilized hundreds of thousands of Irish Americans and played a transitional role in the history of Irish-American nationalism; it also tied Irish nationalism to the land question in a way that neither the Fenians nor their predecessors had attempted. From 1879, the transatlantic movement for land reform reinforced Ford's belief that a better future was possible for Ireland and the world.

The Land League had an inauspicious start in the United States. By the end of January 1881, only 292 branches existed across the country, and the treasurer, Lawrence Walsh, had managed to send only \$5,000 to Dublin. However, things changed in February 1881, when Michael Davitt was arrested in Ireland and detained in Millbank Prison. As Janis has demonstrated, 'Davitt's

²¹ Ibid., p. 77.

²² Ford, *Criminal history*, p. 9.

²³ *Irish World*, 4 Dec. 1875.

²⁴ *Irish World*, 4 Mar. 1876.

²⁵ At the league's first meeting in Irishtown, Michael O'Sullivan declared that 'we cannot shut our eyes to the lessons of the past' that the 'exterminators' had to be removed: *Connaught Telegraph*, 26 Apr. 1879.

²⁶ Janis, *Greater Ireland*, p. 11.

arrest and the parliamentary battle over the Irish coercion bill early in 1881 galvanized Irish-American opinion and resulted in dramatic growth for the Land League.²⁷ The *Irish World* reported that 687 American branches had been formed since the news; in Philadelphia, the League expanded from one branch to twenty-two.²⁸ The British consul general in New York noted that 'the unlooked for arrest of Michael Davitt has given a fresh impulse to the Land League throughout this country and many more clubs have started into existence'.²⁹

Ford initially printed his letters in the spring of 1881, on the front page of the *Irish World*. He arranged for many thousands of copies to be distributed throughout Ireland, in an attempt to antagonize the British government, pressure Parnell and his allies to move in a more radical direction, and direct the collective movement for land reform from New York. William O'Brien later recalled that 'the storm-bell of the *Irish World* boomed across the Atlantic with a very audible note of alarm indeed, that was heard in every mountain-glen in Ireland', that a 'vast Irish-American invasion was sweeping the country with new and irresistible principles of Liberty and Democracy'.³⁰ Ford's effort prompted Gladstone's government to ban the circulation of the *Irish World* in 1881, and attempt to censor Ford's political message. Whether Gladstone read the letters himself is difficult to ascertain, but the incendiary content of the *Irish World*, particularly at the moment of imperial crisis in Africa and Afghanistan, was certainly worrying enough for the Gladstone ministry to justify a targeted effort to censor Ford's writings in Ireland.³¹ Ford's decision to reprint the letters, in *The criminal history*, without edits, was therefore an attempt to circumvent Gladstone's censorship and spread his message to an even wider audience.

The shadow of the Land War lay over Ford's analysis in *The criminal history*. In his first letter, Gladstone was chastised for his 'ineffable meanness in arresting Michael Davitt', the leading light of the land reform movement, 'on a shabby technicality'.³² Ford penned his letters in the context of this upswing in Irish-American political and cultural mobilization. The text was constructed in class terms as a critique of a rapacious minority that exploited the labouring majority. Ford's critique was specifically critical of landlords, the 'Great Criminal Class', which he saw as the driving force of British imperial expansion.³³ For him, the overthrow of the Irish land system was an absolute necessity. Furthermore, every blow 'dealt at Landlordism in Ireland' was 'serviceable also against Landlordism here in America, away in Australia and South

²⁷ Ibid., p. 67.

²⁸ *Irish World*, 26 Feb. 1881.

²⁹ British Consul General, 9 Feb. 1881, Dublin, National Archives of Ireland, Fenian 'A' files 3/715, box 5/A639.

³⁰ William O'Brien, *Recollections* (London, 1905), p. 273.

³¹ *Irish World*, 30 Apr. 1881; Paul A. Townend, *The road to home rule: anti-imperialism and the Irish national movement* (Madison, WI, 2016), p. 139. The paper trail of the British decision to ban the *Irish World* is limited; there is no mention in Hansard or the Gladstone diaries.

³² Ford, *Criminal history*, p. 2.

³³ Ibid., p. 29.

America, in England itself, and, in fact, wherever the gigantic wrong of Land Monopoly exists'.³⁴ As far as Ford was concerned, the question of Ireland's liberation from colonial subjection was inseparable from a larger question of imperial exploitation.³⁵

Ford's anti-imperial critique was a condemnation not of the British people but of the British governing class of landlords and exploiters. He held out hope that the masses in Britain would ultimately prevail against this system. In this sense, his text, while unique in its idiosyncratic origins, was part of a larger milieu of radical thought that stretched back to figures such as Mill and Ricardo. Far from being intrinsically anti-British, it implied that British workers had the potential to join with Irish and other imperial subjects through their bonds of common oppression at the hands of the exploitative class.³⁶ Ford's position was universalist: although he was writing primarily on behalf of the subalterns of empire, he appealed to a universal moral truth, independent of section or faction. According to him, 'I do not appeal to Irishmen. I do not appeal to Catholics – no, nor even to Christians. I ask only that men of common sense and common honesty try the cause.'³⁷ Ford explained that the eventual downfall of the British empire, and a transition to a subsequent, happier stage in human history, was inevitable. For him, this transition was an inescapable historical process, but would be galvanized by the concerted action of Irish people and their allies on both sides of the Atlantic.

Ford's critiques had echoes in British and American radical polemics. English Republican weeklies like *The National Reformer* and radical post-Chartist newspapers like *Reynold's Weekly Newspaper* advanced comparably ambitious critiques of empire that made the land question central.³⁸ What made Ford's text unique within this 'family' of political traditions, alongside the centrality of Ireland to his analysis, was his sense of his own relative significance. According to Ford, 'the Light is spreading', the 'scales are falling from the people's eyes'. Multiple groups in the United States – 'Germans, Frenchmen, Englishmen and Scotchmen, as well as Americans' – were 'reading this *Irish World*'. These groups, 'equally with the Irish, meet upon the platform of its principles as upon common ground'. Wherever the light was spread, 'there the iniquities of your rule are revealed, and the British system comes to be detested'.³⁹ Ireland was 'presenting to the world unmistakable signs of a new social life, a national regeneration, an intellectual awakening, which, when fully aroused, will shake the nations'.⁴⁰

³⁴ *Irish World*, 10 July 1880.

³⁵ The extent to which anti-imperialism was central to the political debates of the New Departure is contentious. See Townend, *Road to home rule*; Janis, *Greater Ireland*.

³⁶ For the most comprehensive discussion of this tradition, see Phemister, *Land and liberalism*.

³⁷ Ford, *Criminal history*, p. 2.

³⁸ For this tradition, see Eugenio F. Biagini, *Liberty, retrenchment and reform: popular liberalism in the age of Gladstone, 1860–1880* (Cambridge, 1992); Mark Hampton, *Visions of the press in Britain, 1850–1950* (Urbana, IL, 2004); Andrew Sartori, *Liberalism in empire: an alternative history* (Berkeley, CA, 2014).

³⁹ Ford, *Criminal history*, p. 5.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

Ford declared that 'all this force and fraud will fail, Mr. Gladstone', as Britain was 'now, unlike the past, dealing with two Irelands'. The 'Greater Ireland is on this side of the Atlantic'.⁴¹ From the 1850s, Irish-American nationalists had framed the emigration from their homeland as a forced exile. John Mitchel and Thomas Meagher had both condemned clerical attempts at finding solace in the fact that the famine had enriched American Catholicism with a new flock.⁴² In *The criminal history*, Ford framed the Irish diaspora as a source of strength, celebrating that 'Ireland is now in the vanguard of the progressive thought of the world'.⁴³ Emigration had brought Irish people into the greatest republic in history, providing them the chance to spread their gospel of Anglophobia and enrich the American nation. Ford therefore centralized his voice as the spokesman of the Irish destiny by promoting the *Irish World* as the true and authoritative voice of Irish-American nationalism. In *The criminal history*, he hoped to spread his anti-imperial gospel to an even wider audience.

III

Ford understood his contemporary moment as a period of imperial interconnection, where the British empire was sustained by, and acted in both concert and competition with, other imperial structures.⁴⁴ However, his analysis framed the British empire as the core monstrous force which had constituted 'a system of diabolism such as has never been equalled since the day that man came upon this planet'.⁴⁵ In his judgement, a better future was only possible if this diabolism, and the intellectual and cultural rhetoric that legitimated it, was expunged. He aspired to reach not only an Irish but also a global audience who would push for a better world. For Ford, the British empire was the barrier to this brighter future, and the central enemy of all Irish people was William Gladstone. Gladstone was an individual 'predestinated unto evil' and a representative of a self-legitimizing, self-actioning system of atrocities, 'of world-wide crimes, perpetrated in all lands and coming down for centuries; each crime being the logical antecedent, or consequence, of some other crime'.⁴⁶

Beginning with an impassioned chronological review of British conquest and exploitation of Ireland, Ford's letters traced the expansion of the global reach of the British landlord class, through American history and then through India, China, and Africa. Throughout *The criminal history*, he constructed a narrative of world history where the British empire had devastated every polity it had come across. Wherever the British flag flew, the ruling class of landlords

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Brendan Ó Cathaoir, 'Mitchel politicised the famine', *Seanchas Ardmhacha: Journal of the Armagh Diocesan Historical Society*, 20 (2005), pp. 155–62.

⁴³ Ford, *Criminal history*, p. 15.

⁴⁴ For example, in 1881, Ford condemned the French occupation of Tunisia under the 'pretence' of protecting Algeria, castigating the French and claiming that its purpose was to 'divert the French from the consideration of social questions by reviving their love of glory': *Irish World*, 28 May 1881.

⁴⁵ Ford, *Criminal history*, p. 2.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

and buccaneers grew richer, while the people of the conquered lands were despoiled.

For Ford, British imperial atrocity began with 'the Crimes of the British Empire in Ireland'.⁴⁷ Ireland was the test case for all that followed. He argued that, in Ireland, every self-justificatory celebration of British civilization and Anglo-Saxon cultural supremacy was a façade. He alleged that England had:

invaded its territory, made war upon its nationality, disinherited its people, choked its language, defaced the monuments of its civilization, banned its creed, pillaged its churches, hunted its priests, gibbeted its patriots, confiscated its property, cloven down its liberties, violated its laws, destroyed its manufacturing industries, annihilated its commerce, sealed up its mines, broken treaties, banished its defenders, plundered its workers, enacted famines, and evicted, exiled and murdered millions of the flower of its population.⁴⁸

To highlight the evils of British imperialism, Ford constructed an idyllic vision of pre-Conquest Ireland. He argued that 'enforced degradation is ever to be measured from the height of original excellence'.⁴⁹ He wrote his first letter to ensure that those of Irish heritage could 'study the history of fatherland in the days of old', and 'see Ireland in her saints, in her heroes, in her statesmen, in her martyrs, in her long suffering and virtuous people'.⁵⁰ This was an invented narrative of a bucolic Celtic past, one that built upon the romantic, philological notions of Gaelic antiquity that were integral to the nationalist self-understanding in Ireland and the United States. The people of 'ancient Christian Ireland' were untouched by avarice and sin; instead, they 'lived as well-nigh up to the commandments of God and the dictates of nature as any people that are known to us'.⁵¹ Pre-conquest Ireland's 'land laws were established in equity and on the principles of natural right', and 'private ownership in the soil was unknown'. In Ireland, before the English, 'the land belonged to the people, and the inherent and inalienable right of every man to a share thereof was universally recognized'.⁵² Unlike in contemporary Ireland, with its system of landlord control that Ford resented, 'rents, fines and evictions were unspoken and unthought of', and 'manufactures abounded'.⁵³

In Ford's interpretation, the central grievance in pre-famine Irish history was the horrors of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. According to

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 7.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 6.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ *Irish World*, 10 Feb. 1872.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ford, *Criminal history*, p. 6. For the Land League and Irish-American labour radicalism, see Michael Davitt, *The land league proposal: a statement for honest and thoughtful men* (Glasgow, 1882); Henry George, *The Irish land question: what it involves, and how alone it can be settled. An appeal to the Land Leagues* (London, 1881); Edward A. Higgins, *Fallacies of Henry George, exposed and refuted: the true philosophy of the land question* (Cincinnati, OH, 1887).

⁵³ Ford, *Criminal history*, p. 6.

him, 'rivers of blood flowed during the best part of the 16th century. Neither age nor sex was spared.' In detailing 'the Desolation of Ireland' from the Tudors through to Cromwell's massacres at Drogheda and Wexford, Ford claimed that it was 'not in the power of words to depict the ruin of those days. Desolation reigned supreme.' This was England's 'mode of pacifying Ireland!' The English 'made the country a desert, and called it peace'. His assessment of Irish history was crafted to corroborate the argument that 'of all the nations that have ever existed, in savagery or in civilization, England, I verily believe, is the most brutal, cruel and perfidious'.⁵⁴ All the leading facts in Anglo-Irish history 'warrant me in saying that, in every age and under every Government, your English nation has been waging a war of extermination against the Irish race'.⁵⁵

In his third letter, Ford shifted his analysis to North America. This letter was crafted to prove that 'the Old World is not the only place where the British Empire has trampled on Human Rights', and that 'every race and complexion here in America have been injured by you'.⁵⁶ He wanted American citizens to recognize that the Irish revolutionary campaigns against the British, which included the Land War and the Dynamite Campaign, were legitimate acts of resistance to tyrannical government, on the model of their own revolutionary ousting of the British. Ford fixated on how the 'British Empire, in the days of its power, strove to reduce and to hold America as an industrial dependency of England in perpetuity' – that the 'Great Criminal Class sought to hold America as a dependency for Ruin and Tribute'.⁵⁷ Citing the highest possible authority, the Declaration of Independence, he informed his readers that the history of British rule in the American colonies was 'a history of repeated injuries and usurpations, all having in direct object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over these States'.⁵⁸

The importance of 1776 to this analysis was self-evident. George Washington had condemned the British during the revolutionary war as 'men who have distressed millions, involved thousands in ruin and plunged numberless in inextricable woe'.⁵⁹ For Ford, the 'name of Washington evokes the spirit of 76; and that Revolution is the epitome of the conflicts in which the genius of freedom crossed swords with the champions of oppression in all the ages of time'.⁶⁰ Framing world history as a dialectical conflict between freedom and oppression, he implicitly tied the centuries of anti-British resistance in Ireland to the revolutionary war.

Furthermore, Ford expanded upon a long-standing argument among Irish Americans that the Irish had been integral to the victory of the patriot

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 8.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 11.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 16.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 29.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 17.

⁵⁹ 'George Washington to Bryan Fairfax, 1 March 1778', in David R. Hoth, *The papers of George Washington* (32 vols., Charlottesville, VA, 2004), xiv, pp. 9–11.

⁶⁰ Ford, *Criminal history*, p. 17.

cause.⁶¹ He attempted to tie the Irish immigrant population into their new homeland's founding narrative, to suggest that Irish people had always been a crucial presence in American life and were foundational to the birth of the republic.⁶² According to Ford, 'Irishmen figured conspicuously in that glorious struggle.' He singled out 'Sullivan of New Hampshire', who 'struck the first blow on rand', and 'O'Brien of Maine', the 'hero of the "Lexington of the Seas"'. Charles Thompson, 'the first Secretary to the National Congress', was the man 'who, with Jefferson, lit up the fires of Liberty', while 'Charles Carroll of Carrollton, having cast off the hated word British subject, signed himself "First Citizen" of the Republic'.⁶³

Implicit in this analysis was the argument that Irish people were the ideal Americans because their experience of subjugation under the British empire made them lovers of liberty. Ford's third letter was an attempt to dispel a prevalent belief that had taken root in the United States: that the American nation was the product of an Anglo-Saxon temperament that was inherently superior to the Celtic race. In *The criminal history*, he urged his readers to realize that the 'crimson tide that flows in the veins of America is largely Irish'.⁶⁴ Describing the war of 1812 as a time when 'the friends of Liberty – in both worlds – trembled for the fate of the young Republic', Ford tied the American victory to Irish-American valour: 'The Genius of Erin Came Upon the Scene, and, like rays shot from the blaze of her own sunburst, out flashed the swords of Jackson and McDonough!'⁶⁵ Both men traced their heritage to Irish Protestant migrants, and neither self-identified as Irish. Nonetheless, in Ford's analysis, the 'son of exiled parents from Ulster' and the hero 'sprang from Galway' both epitomized Irish valour and were prototype Irish anti-imperialists: 'Jackson annihilated your army at New Orleans, and McDonough destroyed your navy on Lake Champlain'.⁶⁶ At a time when Americans were reflecting on the history of their nation and the racial status of the 'true' American people in the aftermath of Reconstruction, Ford's analysis explored an alternative founding narrative, one that carved out a space for Irish people in the United States and situated the founding and survival of the United States as a product of the Irish's hatred of Anglo-Saxon cruelty, and their love of liberty.

Ford's history also laid the blame for slavery and Native American dispossession squarely on the British. British imperialism not only 'opposed the White man' but also 'enslaved the Black man and exterminated the Red man'.⁶⁷ Tellingly, the 'Red man' did not feature again in Ford's analysis besides

⁶¹ Previous examples include Mathew Carey, *Vindiciae hibernicae* (Philadelphia, PA, 1819); Thomas D'Arcy McGee, *A history of the Irish settlers in North America, from the earliest period to the census of 1850* (Boston, MA, 1851).

⁶² Orm Øverland, *Immigrant minds, American identities: making the United States home, 1870–1930* (Urbana, IL, 2000).

⁶³ Ford, *Criminal history*, p. 18.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 19. For the war of 1812, see Alan Taylor, *The civil war of 1812: American citizens, British subjects, Irish rebels, and Indian allies* (New York, NY, 2010).

⁶⁶ Ford, *Criminal history*, p. 19.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

this cursory introduction, as he needed to maintain a clear divide between the British empire and a superior American republic. African Americans, on the other hand, were essential to his analysis. His binary between the United States and the British empire framed the United States as a virtuous foil for the corrupt and debased method of subjugation inherent to British imperialism. In *The criminal history*, Ford turned the institution of slavery into a means to reinforce his dichotomy between England and the United States.

Ford had been a Garrisonian in his early life. He had even declared that 'the position occupied by *The Irish World* today is analogous to that held by William Lloyd Garrison and Wendall Phillips thirty years ago'.⁶⁸ Nonetheless, his argument in *The criminal history* was a far cry from the Garrisonian tradition of condemning the United States as a nation inherently corrupted by slavery.⁶⁹ Ford levelled all the blame for slavery on the British empire: 'slavery was first introduced into the Colonies under the reign of your Queen Elizabeth. She not only tolerated that heinous traffic, but she encouraged it; she herself becoming a sharer in the ill-got gains.'⁷⁰ Ford derided slavery as a 'sin', a stain on the nation, but he dislocated Americans from blame, as 'England was the original cause'.⁷¹

In the fourth letter, Ford expanded the remit of his analysis, to show that there was no 'part of the earth' that was 'not full of your deviltries'. For Ford, the history of the British incursion into 'poor, emaciated, hunger-wasted India' encapsulated his excoriation of British imperialism. In India, there was no 'sin in the criminal calendar' that the British had not committed; 'you have invaded her territory, destroyed her industries, robbed her treasures, and utterly impoverished her people'. The British went to India as traders, but 'established yourselves as a garrison'.⁷² He constructed a similar temporal binary of pre-conquest and post-conquest India to the one that he had employed for Ireland. According to him, India, before 'the blight of the shadow of your British flag fell upon it', was peaceful and plentiful.⁷³ Ford noted that 'from the date of the battle of Plassey, by the event of which British Power was established in India, centralization grew rapidly, and the country became filled with adventurers', men who were 'wholly without principle – men whose sole object was the accumulation of fortune by any means, however foul'.⁷⁴ The binary of enrichment and subjugation was evident; rather than the metropole and colonies enriching one another within a refined web, England 'was thus enriched as India became impoverished'.⁷⁵

⁶⁸ *Irish World*, 16 Apr. 1881.

⁶⁹ W. Caleb McDaniel, *The problem of democracy in the age of slavery: Garrisonian abolitionists and transatlantic reform* (Baton Rouge, LA, 2013).

⁷⁰ Ford, *Criminal history*, p. 16.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 23.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

IV

Ford's *Criminal history* was published at a moment of global imperial transition. In the 1880s, the British empire was at its height. Within a few years, the British, alongside other European powers, would begin to colonize the African continent during the 'Scramble for Africa'.⁷⁶ At the same time, the United States had emerged from the civil war and Reconstruction and had established itself as a continental empire. Many in both the United States and the British empire were beginning to predict that the United States would soon supplant the British empire as the global hegemon.⁷⁷ This transitional context was crucial to the arguments that Ford advanced in *The criminal history*. He explained that the British empire's status as the pre-eminent power in the world was secured through exploitation and force, and that the positive justifications used by British imperialists were fraudulent. In doing so, he celebrated the United States' emergence as a rival and a counterweight to the British empire; according to Ford, the United States had achieved greatness because of its republican ideals and promise of freedom.

In explaining Britain's contemporary power, Ford first focused on British rule in Ireland. The crux of his narrative of British persecution of Ireland was the great famine of 1845–52. It was within Gladstone's own lifetime that the world 'witnessed with horror the desolating spectacle of the Irish Exodus'.⁷⁸ In 1847, when 'the men of Galway town, driven out from their houses by the cries of their hungry little ones, offered to lay hands on the food products of their own soil', the British sent 'cavalry' and 'flying artillery to escort that food to the ships in the dock'.⁷⁹ Ford subscribed to a nationalist interpretation of the history of the famine as an intentional genocide, an interpretation which John Mitchel had popularized in the 1850s: Britain could have fed and saved the Irish but chose not to, and instead let countless Irish people starve.⁸⁰ Whereas 'the heart of the world wept at the spectacle', the 'devilish authors of all this misery', the English, 'chuckled with diabolical glee at the sight'. The British enjoyed the sight of Irish suffering because they 'thought the Irish nation was dead at last'.⁸¹ According to Ford, 'much was said by philanthropic men against Negro Slavery in the Southern States', yet 'abominable as chattel slavery was, was not the temporal condition of the Black man preferable to that of the Irishman?' This contrast between British rule in Ireland and the enslavers in the United States was an opportunistic means to condemn a nation that had memorialized 1833 as a moment of British imperial

⁷⁶ Jeanette Eileen Jones, *In search of brightest Africa: reimagining the dark continent in American culture, 1884–1936* (Athens, GA, 2011); Thomas Pakenham, *The scramble for Africa* (London, 2015).

⁷⁷ Antony G. Hopkins, *American empire in global history* (Princeton, NJ, 2018); Duncan Bell, *Dreamworlds of race: empire and the utopian destiny of Anglo-America* (Princeton, NJ, 2020).

⁷⁸ Ford, *Criminal history*, p. 11.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ John Mitchel, *Jail journal* (Dublin, 1913); Mark G. McGowan, 'The famine plot revisited: a reassessment of the great Irish famine as genocide', *Genocide Studies International*, 11 (2017), pp. 87–104.

⁸¹ Ford, *Criminal history*, p. 11.

benevolence. The 'Slave Lord, whilst he robbed the Negro, took upon himself the responsibility of feeding, clothing, and housing him'; the 'Land Lord robbed the Irish serf, and disclaimed all responsibility for the consequence of his action'.⁸²

Ford alleged that the British empire, despite Britain's history of condemning the United States as a slave republic since 1833, 'recognized the Slave Empire of the South and granted it belligerent rights'. Furthermore, he alleged that the British 'built and manned privateers, which steamed out from English ports to scour the seas, harass American ships, prey upon American commerce, and sweep the American flag from the ocean'. British conduct during the American civil war remained a touchy subject in the post-bellum United States – particularly moments such as the Trent Affair, when the USS *San Jacinto*'s seizure of the British mail packet RMS *Trent* for transporting two Confederate envoys, James Murray Mason and John Slidell, had brought the United States and the British empire close to war in 1861; and the arbitration dispute over the CSS *Alabama*, which had been built in Liverpool.⁸³ Ford therefore used British conduct to allege that the British empire never truly cared about the welfare of American slaves; the British's abolitionist pronouncements before 1861 were merely tools to criticize a potential rival.

Ford framed the 1863 Emancipation Proclamation as the baptism of the nation, which liberated the Union from the stain of slavery. Instead of 'applauding the act of this nation', the British empire 'denounced our Government, defamed its motives, threw obstacles in the way of its success, and gave aid and comfort to its foes'.⁸⁴ The proclamation was a polarizing war-time decision: a large body of critics, including many Irish Americans, denounced the measure in their popular press. In fact, Irish Americans voted overwhelmingly for Lincoln's Democratic rival, George McClellan, in 1864.⁸⁵ However, Ford reimagined the proclamation as a universal reflection of patriotic American sentiment, removing from the narrative any doubt or dissent. In reconceptualizing the Union war effort from the outset as a crusade to abolish slavery, and to liberate the nation from the legacy of British colonialism, he centralized the conflict within a broader teleology of liberty and bondage. In his view, the United States was the champion of freedom, while the British empire was the true power behind the Confederacy, the puppet master pulling the strings.

⁸² Ibid., p. 12.

⁸³ Ibid., p. 30. For the history of Britain and the American civil war, see Richard J. M. Blackett, *Divided hearts: Britain and the American civil war* (Baton Rouge, LA, 2000); Howard Jones, *Blue and gray diplomacy: a history of Union and Confederate foreign relations* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2010).

⁸⁴ Ford, *Criminal history*, p. 19.

⁸⁵ See *The Pilot*, 5 Nov. 1864; Jonathan W. White, *Emancipation, the Union army, and the reelection of Abraham Lincoln* (Baton Rouge, LA, 2014); Mark E. Neely Jr, *Lincoln and the Democrats: the politics of opposition in the civil war* (New York, NY, 2017); Keith Altavilla, 'McClellan's men: Union army Democrats in 1864', in Andrew S. Bledsoe and Andrew F. Lang, eds., *Upon the field of battle: essays on the military history of America's civil war* (Baton Rouge, LA, 2018).

In the fourth letter, Ford condemned British involvement in the transatlantic slave trade.⁸⁶ He alleged that 'the large fortune which you have inherited was coined, every penny of it, out of the blood and tears of those outraged Africans'. Upending the British posturing as an abolitionist empire, he cast the British abolitionist community as a minority light in an empire of darkness, thereby reinforcing his belief in the distinction between the English oligarchic system and the capacity for individual English people to be on the right side of history. When 'negro emancipation came into Parliament', men like Gladstone 'contended that the Slave Lords ought to be compensated for their "property"', just as 'today you are fighting the battles of the Land Lords likewise'.⁸⁷

British conduct in China during the opium wars (1839–42 and 1856–60) gave Ford further examples to delegitimize the civilizing façade of British rule.⁸⁸ For him, 'forcing Opium Down the Throats of the People in China' was an attempt at 'the destruction, moral and physical, of the people of that land'.⁸⁹ The empire 'turned your loaded cannons upon the inoffensive Chinese' and 'murdered themselves without distinction or pity', all because 'the Government of China refused, at your demand, to legalize the trade in opium'. Within this critique, Ford could not dislocate himself from civilizational assumptions of Western Christian superiority. His condemnation concerned not only the methods of subjugation but also the failures of the British to capitalize on their conquest and instil Christianity into China. The empire, cloaked in the superficial justification of spreading God's light, 'under the protection of your redcoated assassins, sent out ministers, bibles and tracts to instruct the Chinese in English Christianity'. The British 'succeeded in crushing the bodies, but you could not win a victory over the consciences of those outraged people'. Ford thus incorporated both Anglophobic and anti-Protestant sentiment into a wider critique of an empire failing to hold itself to its rhetoric of civilizational agenda and Christian conduct.⁹⁰

Furthermore, Ford used the contemporary situation in India to allege that 'the moral condition of India has likewise degenerated under British rule'.⁹¹ The economic suffering of India was implicitly paralleled with the great Irish famine of 1845–9. Ford alleged that 'in the hundred years of your rule eighteen English-made famines have devastated India' and that, 'the more British domination is extended, in time and space, the poorer and more wretched does India become'. Niall Whelehan has argued that Ford's anti-imperialism 'not only blended into separatist feeling, but incorporated a further element: the idea of imperialism as a mechanism of mass expropriation'.⁹²

⁸⁶ Eric Williams, *Capitalism and slavery* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1944; repr. 1966); Padraic X. Scanlan, *Slave empire: how slavery built modern Britain* (London, 2020); Michael Taylor, *The interest: how the British establishment resisted the abolition of slavery* (London, 2020).

⁸⁷ Ford, *Criminal history*, p. 26.

⁸⁸ Julia Lovell, *The opium war: drugs, dreams and the making of China* (London, 2011).

⁸⁹ Ford, *Criminal history*, p. 22.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² Whelehan, *The dynamiters*, p. 115.

Tying his condemnation to a wider judgement on the oligarchic nature of British imperialism, Ford connected the landlord class in Ireland to the subjugation of British imperialism across the globe. India provided him with a well-spring of examples to condemn Britain. The central message of his analysis was clear: 'all this continent of wretchedness' was 'produced and perpetuated to minister to the rapacious desires of one Great Criminal Class'.⁹³

Ford's final reflection on global imperialism was on British incursions into the African continent, where 'you have been a curse at home and abroad'. For him, 'There is not a brick in your social structure but is cemented with the blood of her children'.⁹⁴ From 'Egypt to Capetown your British Empire has been a curse to the people of Africa'.⁹⁵ In 1875, the British 'gobbled up Mohammereh, at the mouth of the Euphrates; and by the acquisition of 117,000 Suez Canal shares you gained a casus interventionis in Egypt'; in 1877, the British 'annexed, in spite of the protests of the population, the Transvaal Republic in South Africa'. The first Boer war was still ongoing when he composed his letter; when 'the British yoke became intolerable to those people' in the Transvaal, 'rising up, as brave men, they swore to regain their liberties or perish in the attempt'.⁹⁶ In Ford's analysis, British conduct across the globe proved 'that force successfully employed is the only argument you can understand'.⁹⁷

V

Throughout *The criminal history*, Ford predicted that the British empire was doomed to 'fall as Rome fell'.⁹⁸ He chastised British assumptions of permanence, which he derided as ahistorical and ignorant, when 'already are the signs of breaking up'.⁹⁹ His work constructed a binary between a powerful empire of the past and a declining, derided, failing force in the present, where 'as a military power you have lost prestige in the eyes of Europe' and 'rank today but a second-rate force in the councils of Europe'.¹⁰⁰ Throughout his assessment, the promise of a better future shone through. He depicted Britain's imperial project as an ultimately futile endeavour that would eventually self-destruct, when 'the eyes of the oppressed are open – when the peoples of various countries come to recognize one another as brethren born of the one Father'. When 'the conquest of peoples is denounced as a crime, and the spoliation of labor is confessed as a sin', and when 'the Golden Rule comes to be accepted as the standard of moral actions of responsible beings', then the world the British empire represented would be a distant memory.¹⁰¹

⁹³ Ford, *Criminal history*, p. 31.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

Ford's futural analysis was a call to his readers to realize that the next stage in world history would be the creation of a world free from domination, a world of free nations, untouched by oligarchic or alien rule. He envisioned Ireland's self-determination, but he tied this vision to a world order that required economic and political reform, dislocated from the old methods of domination and from the dominating class of oligarchs. His vision of empire was not simply a binary between colonizer and colonized, oppressor and oppressed, but was a structure founded on racial and social hierarchy, fraying at the seams and coming apart through its own internal contradictions. His text concluded by venturing beyond the history of British imperialism to construct an expansive, open vision of regeneration, a vision of a future modernity that would create its own normativity and would no longer be bound to the commercial and political logic imposed upon the world by the British empire. For Ford, Gladstone would not be able to 'recall the names of scores of empires that once boasted of armies, navies, statesmen, foreign possessions; but of whose glory there is now no trace, and the very sites of whose great cities are a subject of dispute among antiquarians'.¹⁰² He argued that 'the fate that befell Jerusalem' would overtake the British empire in time.¹⁰³

In castigating the British empire, Ford held up Ireland as the contrast and source of hope for an inevitable downfall, and the *Irish World* as the voice of Ireland and the path to a better future; he wanted 'to open the eyes of the people', to 'spread the light'.¹⁰⁴ He claimed that 'The Irish World simply wants to do God's will upon earth', to 'effect a reformation of the social system'. He wanted 'to see Ireland absolutely emancipated from British domination and take her rightful place among the nations of the earth'.¹⁰⁵ Ford wanted more, however: he wanted 'for man something more than the semblance of the thing called "Liberty" – something more than the hollow privilege of casting a vote for one of two caucus-made politicians'.¹⁰⁶ This would be a future of self-enlightenment, when the 'wage-serfs' across the empire would no longer be 'politically drunk', and would cease to 'shout "Freedom," and dance in their chains'.¹⁰⁷ His was a vision of a new modernity where the Irish would construct their future, and the future of a post-imperial world, out of the ruins of the imperial present. In his analysis, Irish people had a duty and a power to make the world anew.

For Patrick Ford, the British empire was 'the kingdom of the Evil One on this earth', a kingdom that had 'stripped and impoverished nations, assassinated millions of human beings, shed rivers of blood, violated treaties, crushed labor, established a false principle in trade, and trampled on every recognized law human and divine'.¹⁰⁸ This rhetoric of incomparable cruelty underlay all of his analysis: 'Other empires have subjugated nations and have ruled their

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid., p. 34.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 35.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 32.

peoples with a rod of iron; but none has displayed such a demoniac spirit of pure cursedness.' According to Ford, the British empire was unique in its viciousness: 'Rome assimilated, Russia absorbs, but the British Empire destroys.' It 'tramples on the laws of God'. Therefore, the empire was 'by pre-eminence the Empire of Sin'; this was as evident in Ireland as anywhere under the British flag.¹⁰⁹

In 1881, Ford believed that real change seemed genuinely possible, and that all the signs of history pointed in this direction; his analysis was of the explicit moment. However, his vision for a better future would never escape from the realm of imagination. In fact, the 1880s witnessed a dampening of potential for Ford's vision of Irish nationalism fused with anti-imperialism. Following the Phoenix Park murders of Saturday 6 May 1882, when the Irish chief secretary Frederick Cavendish and under-secretary Thomas Henry Burke were killed by the Invincibles, a small offshoot of the Irish Republican Brotherhood in Dublin, the majority of Irish people in Ireland and the United States were horrified. Militant nationalism suffered a huge blow. As Paul Bew has suggested, the murders placed Gladstone's new 'alliance with Parnell' on 'a more stable basis'.¹¹⁰ In fact, Eugenio Biagini has argued that it was 'indicative of Fenianism's limited revolutionary potential that its members were overwhelmed by horror at the sight of the decapitation of British government in Ireland'.¹¹¹ After 1882, the end of the Land War and the shift in Irish nationalism towards political reform with home rule without corresponding social reform ensured that the anti-imperialism of *The criminal history* was increasingly out of place in an era defined by Parnellite accommodation with the British empire.

Furthermore, Ford's opinion of Gladstone would evolve over the course of the following decades, until Gladstone's death in 1898. In 1881, Gladstone represented the apogee of British imperial malice in the *Irish World*, but his conversion to the cause of home rule over the 1880s gradually tempered Ford's distaste. In 1886, Parnell's Home Rule Bill was defeated by the actions of Joseph Chamberlain, whose resignation from Gladstone's cabinet brought the Conservatives back into power.¹¹² The political emergence of Chamberlain, Arthur Balfour, and Robert Cecil, Lord Salisbury, all fervent opponents of Irish self-government, ensured that Gladstone was eventually supplanted as the leading pariah in the *Irish World*.

Ford's text was reprinted in 1915. By this point, the better future that he had hoped for had not arrived. Instead, the First World War was devastating Europe, and the British empire was mobilizing Ireland, Canada, India, and its African colonies for manpower in the conflict. Contrary to Ford's hopes, Irish people at home and within the wider Irish world – with the exception of the United States, where Irish Americans remained devoted critics of the

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ Paul Bew, *Ireland: the politics of enmity 1789–2006* (Oxford, 2007), pp. 336–7.

¹¹¹ Eugenio Biagini, 'Liberty and nationalism in Ireland, 1798–1922', *Historical Journal*, 51 (2008), pp. 793–809, at p. 801. See also Matthew J. Kelly, *The Fenian ideal and Irish nationalism, 1882–1916* (London, 2006).

¹¹² Eugenio Biagini, *British democracy and Irish nationalism, 1876–1906* (Cambridge, 2007).

British war effort – were largely supportive of the war.¹¹³ A year after the republication, Irish nationalists would rise against British rule in Dublin; the Easter Rising would be quickly suppressed, but the execution of the leading rebels set in motion a chain of events that ended with the establishment of the Irish Free State, the Irish civil war, and the partition of Ireland.¹¹⁴ Ireland would be independent from the British empire, but its divided and confessionally polarized independence was far from the predictions of *The criminal history of the British empire*. Nonetheless, the ultimate failure of Ford's vision should not obfuscate the significance of the vision itself; in 1881, *The criminal history* was an incendiary and innovative text. Through the text, historians of the Irish presence in the United States can get a sense of the worldview that the leading radical voice of Irish America sought to inculcate among his readership. These letters were Ford's attempt to prevent second-generation Irish Americans from forgetting their ethnic heritage, and instead provide the Irish-American community with an enraging narrative of the past, and an inspiring vision for the future.

Competing interests. The author declares none.

¹¹³ Niamh Gallagher, *Ireland and the great war: a social and political history* (London, 2020).

¹¹⁴ Michael Hopkinson, *The Irish war of independence* (Montreal, 2004); Charles Townshend, *Easter 1916: the Irish rebellion* (London, 2006); Peter Cottrell, *The Irish civil war, 1922–23* (London, 2008); Fearghal McGarry, *The rising: Ireland: Easter 1916* (Oxford, 2016).

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