

1. Record Nr.	UNINA9910963553803321
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Titolo	The Irish through British eyes : perceptions of Ireland in the Famine era // Edward G. Lengel
Pubbl/distr/stampa	Westport, Conn. : , : Praeger, , 2002 London : , : Bloomsbury Publishing, , 2024
ISBN	9798400672736 9786610422913 9781280422911 1280422912 9780313012440 031301244X
Edizione	[1st ed.]
Descrizione fisica	1 online resource (197 p.)
Disciplina	941.5081
Soggetti	Public opinion - Great Britain - History - 19th century Famines - Public opinion - Great Britain Ireland History Famine, 1845-1852 Ireland Foreign public opinion, British History 19th century Ireland Relations Great Britain Great Britain Relations Ireland
Lingua di pubblicazione	Inglese
Formato	Materiale a stampa
Livello bibliografico	Monografia
Note generali	Bibliographic Level Mode of Issuance: Monograph
Nota di bibliografia	Includes bibliographical references (p. [167]-178) and index.
Nota di contenuto	Machine generated contents note: 1. Race, Gender, Class and the Historiography of English -- Perceptions of the Irish 1 -- 2. Public Perceptions of the Irish Question, 1840-1845 19 -- 3. Official Britain and the Condition of the Ireland Question, -- 1841-1852 55 -- 4. The Famine and English Public Opinion, 1845-1850 97 -- 5. Aftermath of Disaster: Public Perceptions of the Irish -- Question, 1850-1860 129.
Sommario/riassunto	The mainstream British attitude toward the Irish in the first half of the 1840s was based upon the belief in Irish improvability. Most educated British rejected any notion of Irish racial inferiority and insisted that under middle-class British tutelage the Irish would in time reach a standard of civilization approaching that of Britain. However, the potato

famine of 1846-1852, which coincided with a number of external and domestic crises that appeared to threaten the stability of Great Britain, led a large portion of the British public to question the optimistic liberal attitude toward the Irish. Rhetoric concerning the relationship between the two peoples would change dramatically as a result. Prior to the famine, the perceived need to maintain the Anglo-Irish union, and the subservience of the Irish, was resolved by resort to a gendered rhetoric of marriage. Many British writers accordingly portrayed the union as a natural, necessary and complementary bond between male and female, maintaining the appearance if not the substance of a partnership of equals. With the coming of the famine, the unwillingness of the British government and public to make the sacrifices necessary, not only to feed the Irish but to regenerate their island, was justified by assertions of Irish irredeemability and racial inferiority. By the 1850s, Ireland increasingly appeared not as a member of the British family of nations in need of uplifting, but as a colony whose people were incompatible with the British and needed to be kept in place by force of arms.
