Imperial heritage

Arthur Cecil Pigou, generally remembered as the architect of welfare economics, was the scion of several families of military officers, minor aristocrats, privileged officeholders, and freebooters whose fortunes prospered with the increasing power and wealth of the British empire in the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries. His forebears included a number of colourful figures, men who proved quite adept at exploiting opportunities created by the rapidly changing conditions for success in the British polity and economy.

John Lees, First Baronet of Blackrock, Ireland, was born around 1739 in Ayrshire, Scotland, and was educated for a public career. After joining the British army, he served in Germany during the Seven Years’ War, although in what capacity is not clear. He was noticed by John Manners, Marquis of Cranbury, through whom he met the Marquis of Townshend, a major general who fought in the Battle of Villinghausen. When the general was appointed the new Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, Lees accompanied him as privy secretary. In 1772, Lord Simon Harcourt replaced the Marquis of Townshend as the British Viceroy in Ireland, and Lees also served as his secretary.

The death of Lord Harcourt in 1777 did not spell the end of Lees’ advancement. Three years earlier, he had established a foundation for a flourishing career by purchasing the office of Secretary of the Irish Post Office, paying his predecessor an undisclosed annuity and the next previous occupant of the office £812 annually. In 1781, he was appointed Under-Secretary of the War Department in Ireland. A comparable path opened in England when Prime Minister Lord North offered him the position of Under-Secretary of State in 1783. Lees demurred, and in 1784...
was officially appointed Secretary of the Post Office in Ireland, the office he had bought ten years earlier. In 1801, Lees’ fourth son, Edward Smith, began to assist his increasingly infirm father as joint Secretary at the age of 18. After his father’s death in 1811, Edward became the sole Secretary, retaining the office until 1831.

By the standards of their time, John and Edward Lees were honourable men who managed the Irish Post Office with fidelity and industry. They renovated its infrastructure – post roads, mail coaches, and mail boats – and introduced express mail service across the Irish Sea. Under their management, the penny post system improved, deliveries increased, and new letter offices were established throughout the country. Acting as informants to the British government, they also reported to Whitehall on Irish reactions to political rumours and threats. Both father and son were knighted for their services to the crown.

John Lees and his wife, Mary, daughter of Robert Cathcart of Ayrshire, had six sons and one daughter. As Secretary, his annual salary was £423. Yet on his death, he bequeathed an estimated £100,000–£250,000 to three of his sons. He left an additional £20,000 to his first son, Harcourt, a graduate of Trinity College, Cambridge, and a political pamphleteer, to support his inheritance of the baronetcy. John Lees could hardly have achieved substantial wealth through his salary alone. How did he amass such a fortune?

Like many British political appointees in Ireland at the time, John and Edward Lees energetically conducted their offices for private gain. Free from the scrutiny of regular audits or close supervision by postmaster generals, they liberally dispensed jobs and contracts to friends and relatives, sold appointments to others, and embezzled property. They used the riches they acquired for the sumptuous appointment of their homes, built on prime real estate. John Anderson, a relative and friend of the family, was awarded a contract to operate the mail coach between Dublin and Limerick. The terms of his contract included special concessions and overcompensation worth £1638. Edward Lees hired his brother Thomas as senior clerk, promoting him to chief clerk within a year and paying him additional income to jointly superintend the port of Wexford. Thomas was also given control of a suspension fund created from fines imposed on post office contractors and officers. The balance of this fund, £200–£900, was neither deposited in a bank nor audited. Harcourt Lees treated the Irish post as his personal fiefdom, visiting it regularly for hours at a time and taking full advantage of its services. Post office clerks wrote and copied numerous letters and articles on his behalf, using office stationery and dispatching them by employing his