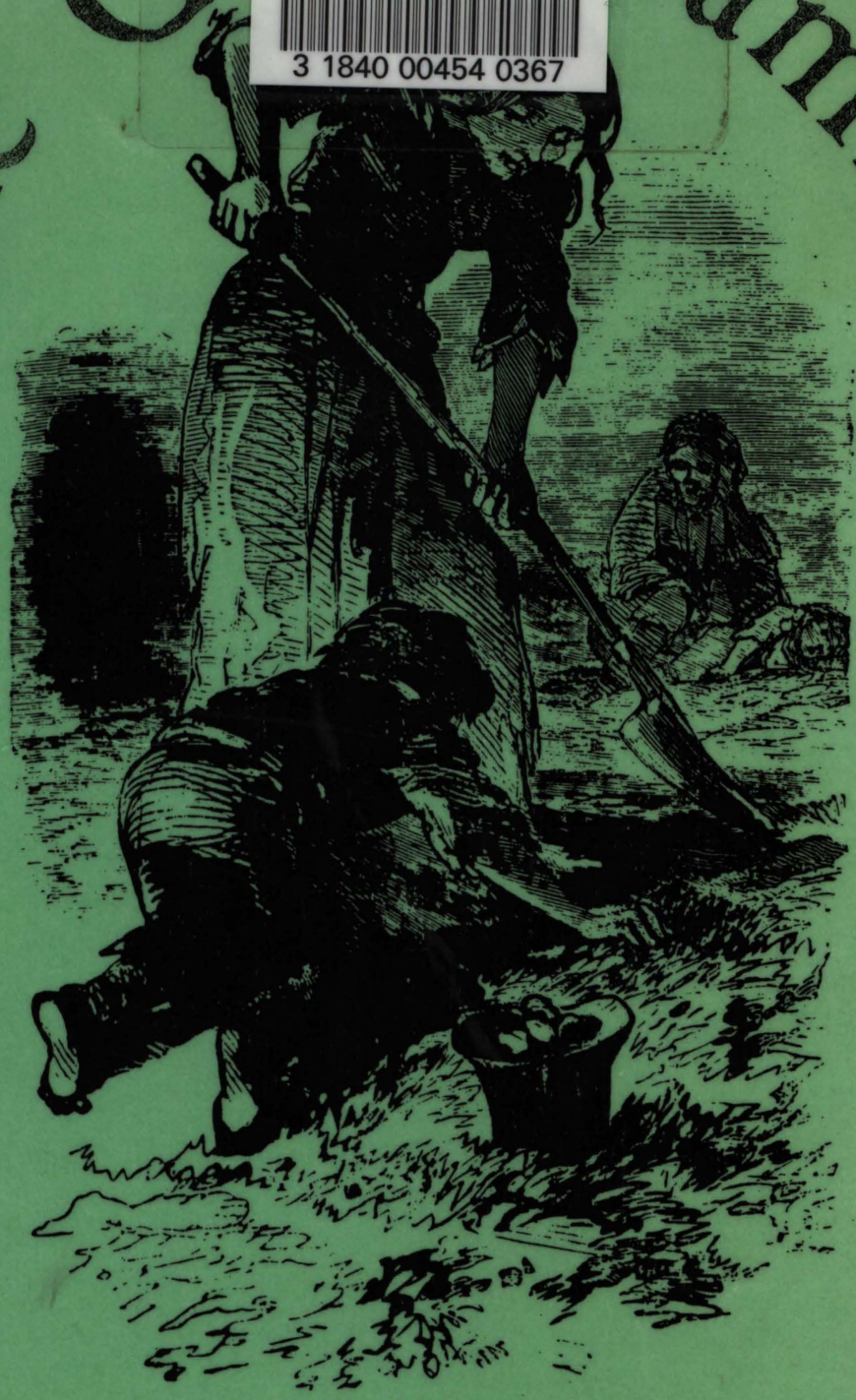
1998

# The Great Irish Famine, 1845-52 : seminar papers

National Endowment for the Humanities Summer Seminar for Teachers Trinity College, Hartford)

# The Great Famine









## IRELAND 1845-1852

N.E.H. Summer Seminar for Teachers

Trinity College, Hartford, CT

1998

# The Great Irish Famine, 1845-52

## Seminar Papers

The National Endowment for the Humanities
Summer Seminar for Teachers
Thomas M. Truxes, Director
Trinity College
Hartford, Connecticut
June 29 - July 30, 1998

The National Endowment for the Humanities
Summer 1998 Seminar, Trinity College

# "The Great Irish Famine"

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## *Introduction*

The Great Irish Famine of the 1840s was a watershed event in Irish history and the last major European famine. In the late summer of 1845, the fungus *phytophthora infestans* struck Ireland for the first time, bringing disaster to more than a third of the population—the large class of cottiers and landless peasants wholly dependent on a diet of potatoes and milk. In the years that followed, repeated failures of the potato crop, coupled with harsh government policies that severely restricted relief, led to the entire collapse of rural Irish society. In addition to the roughly one million Irish men, women, and children who lost their lives to hunger and disease as the direct consequence of the failure of the potato, another two million emigrated, many of them to North America, in the decade after 1845. Famine immigrants into the United States forever changed the cultural and political composition of this country. They also brought with them searing memories of pain, suffering, loss, and guilt.

Ireland's great subsistence crisis is a case study in the history of global hunger providing a frame of reference within which to better comprehend the suffering and ambiguities created by similar disasters today. However, the Irish Famine is a multi-dimensional subject. Through it, we confront a root cause of Ireland's struggle to achieve a national identity. The great themes of Irish history (land, politics, religion, emigration) are all present in this compelling story. But it has taken nearly a century and a half for Irish people worldwide to come to terms with the tragedy of the Famine. Today, long-held assumptions about Ireland's past are being reexamined as Irish historians begin to see their subject within a larger frame of reference: notably Europe and the North Atlantic community. Viewed from a broader vantage, the cataclysm of the Famine was part of the sometimes painful and jarring process of modernization. For these reasons, as well as the rising interest in Irish studies throughout the English-speaking world, sesquicentennial commemorations of the Irish Famine around the world have brought a new awareness of that nation's "Great Calamity.

T.M.T.

# Blame it on the Rain

Sean G. Arthurs

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During the late 1980's, the pop group of Milli Vanilli and their album "Girl, You Know It's True" sold millions of records and rocketed up the global music charts. Though their songs were often nothing more than trite croonings set to an appealing beat, their lyrics seemed to resonate with fans worldwide. Sentiments such as those expressed in "Blame it on the Rain"

"You've got to put the blame somewhere..
don't put the blame on you..
blame it on the rain,
because the rain don't mind"[1]

appealed to listeners everywhere. People wanted to hear that it wasn't their fault, that they weren't to blame. While the duo comprising Milli Vanilli were later exposed as camera-friendly lip synchers, their lyrics could not have captured homo sapien's attitudes towards blame and responsibility more accurately. To be blamed for something is to be stigmatized as a wrongdoer and no one, past or present, wants to bear the negative stigma of blame. Nietzsche claimed that, to avoid this stigmatization, people go to great subconscious depths and levels of self-deception to find the "truly" blameworthy: anyone but themselves. Nietzsche termed this "reversal of the evaluating glance- this inevitable orientation to the outside instead of back onto itself" 'ressentiment' and established the "physiologocial causation of ressentiment" as "a yearning, then, to anaesthetize pain."[2] Though Milli Vanilli advocates attributing blame to inevitable meteorological occurrences while Nietzsche suggests any target outside of oneself will suffice, the message is the same: blame is an undesirable assignation and one to be eluded, however possible.

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1 Milli Vanilli, "Blame it on the Rain", *Girl You Know It's True*, 1988

2 Friedrich Nietzsche, On the Genealogy of Morality. Cambridge University Press, 1994 (p.21,99)

On a larger scale, this desire to avoid being stigmatized creates a protective and defensive perimeter around ever-increasing units- the family, the ethnic group, the nationality- with whom individuals identify, and human history becomes nothing more than a sanitized retelling of dates, events and apotheotic moments. Unfortunately, this idyllic and escapist illusion is a selfish and harmful approach to reconstructing a past from which we must build a future.

As teachers and historians we have a duty to seek the truth- no matter how unpleasant or painful it may be. Though the objectivity of the sciences may be an unachievable reality, the desire to pursue such truth is what motivates both our analysis of the past and our selection of the methods with which we analyze. In turn, we are called to inculcate in our students the importance of this historical integrity in both how they understand the past and why. When the inevitable "Who is to blame?" or "Isn't it the fault of the...?" question is posed and a classroom set of inquisitive eyes are gazing into our own, it would be irresponsible to tritely provide them with the one or two word answer they seek. We must instead equip our students with the proper framework and assessment tools so that they can investigate and resolve the issue of blame themselves. To help us accomplish this task, I have pieced together a philosophy and history hybrid model for examining blameworthiness in history. As well, I have briefly discussed the role of blame attribution in history and, throughout this paper, attempted to address the major concerns of modern historians regarding the role and validity of moral assessments in our study of the past. Once our model is completed, I will attempt to apply it to one of the most controversial and divisive issues in Irish History: The Great Irish Famine.

The story of the human is rife with heroic achievements and propitious actions. It is also marked by contradiction, negligence, and moral nadirs. Human history did not happen in a moral abyss- there were choices made, alternatives not taken, values weighed, and just as many triumphs of good over evil as evil over good. For too long, historians have felt the need to impart and teach about a past where all actions and choices can be explained once viewed in their proper context. This amounts to a history that passes no judgments, an historical narrative that forever succeeds in explaining away accountability. No one is held responsible for their actions because these actions, according to this non-evaluative history, can all be explained once one considers the agent's family and background and the prevailing attitudes and norms of the day. But history did not happen in a moral vacuum and to teach it as such is to perpetrate lies. History is the class where students learn about their ancestors, about man and woman's heroic struggles, about the ineluctable wheel of

progress, and, most importantly, about how they can make a difference and affect the world. History teaches students how to look behind and how to evaluate, how to critique, and how to learn from the mistakes of others, so that they may march ahead, confident and aware. Our students need to learn as much, perhaps more, from examples of the past when humans made reprehensible and flawed decisions and choices, as they need to learn about the efficacious and righteous. Determining what actions and decisions a society holds to be praiseworthy and what actions are to be considered blameworthy helps our students understand the moral parameters that existed in the past, how they evolved, and how their own lives and actions are to be assessed.

John Higham argues that, especially in today's world of rampant ethical relativism, the historian has an obligation to become a moral critic and, as such, "derives from moral criticism an enlarged and disciplined sensitivity to what men ought to have done, what they might have done, and what they achieved."[3] Is this sensitivity not exactly what we seek to sow in our students? We need to teach our students to hold historical agents accountable- we need to imbue them with a sense of what is right and of what is wrong- we need to tell them that just as we give credit where credit is due, we must also assign blame where blame is due.

But how do we, creatures of vastly different moral paradigms, social mores, and economic and political exigencies, evaluate the decision-making of someone who lived in a completely different time and faced a much different reality? To avoid what C.S. Lewis termed 'chronological snobbery,' if we are to evaluate the actions of past actors, then we must evaluate them on their own terms, not on the rubrics of today. In order to determine if an action taken is objectively right, regardless of when it was pursued, we need to see history from the perspective of the "ideal observer"- the first component of our two-part model for determining historical blameworthiness. This model requires that we examine actions through a lens that:

(1) is **omniscient**- viewing all possible facts and options simultaneously

(2) is **disinterested** in protecting or perpetuating any particular viewpoint or ideology

(3) is **dispassionate**- not given to maudlin sentimentality or emotion

(4) is **consistent** in meting judgment- 'the same crime always gets the same time'

(5) **ignores the effects** of the decision/ action

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[3]John Higham, "Beyond Consensus: The Historian as Moral Critic," *The American Historical Review* 67 (1962) 625

(6) is a **contemporary** of the action or decision being studied[4]

To expound on the fifth qualification, our ideal observer will be oblivious to what David Weberman calls the "delayed properties of the past" and the inevitable tendency to continually reinterpret and reevaluate past events in the changing light of the current political and social zeitgeist.[5] For example, our ideal observer could never refer to "the winning lottery ticket", "the last emperor", or "the war to end wars" because these descriptions presuppose knowledge of a relevant, later event. Whether the lottery ticket is the one that ensures our actor an eternity of decadent living or is merely another small step on the road to financial ruin, our ideal observer model will only permit us to see our agent making the ticket purchase- we will have access to none of the short or long-term effects of this purchase.

Our model's final attribute necessitates that our viewpoint be free from the dreaded moral relativism- the application of today's moral standards to actions of the past- that is the castle wall of the non-evaluative defense. This moral relativism or 'presentism' approach is a very serious and justified concern of historians, especially given the oppressive tendency of each generation to view not only their technology but also their morals as superior to their antecedents. However, in much the same way that we view the technological progression of civilization should we view the corresponding moral and ideological development. To illustrate, consider the state of medical technology during the Civil War. Do we now look back on Civil War doctors and accuse them of serial murder because they were unable to save the lives of thousands of injured soldiers- soldiers who today would be home and resting within a week? The clear answer is "no"- we can't hold these doctors accountable for possessing medical technology and expertise that had not yet been deceloped. Similarly, we must tell our students, political ideas and schools of thought take time, dedication, and inspiration to develop- we need to remain aware of what political, social, economic, and moral "instruments" were available to our agents at the the time they acted.

Is a legitimate realization of this ideal observer model possible? While I would argue that, given the inherent imperfect nature of humans, such objectivity in historical analysis is impossible, it is nonetheless the model we should employ because it gives us an ideal framework for which to strive. Once we have established a perspective that complies with the six requirements of the ideal

[4] I have taken much of the ideal observer parameters from Bruce Kuklick, "The Mind of the Historian," *History and Theory* 8 (1969), 315

[5] David Weberman, "The Nonfixity of the Historical Past," *The Review of Metaphysics* 50 (1997), 749-768

observer model, we can, hopefully, be in a position to make a valid assessment of whether the action was right or wrong- whether the action is praiseworthy or blameworthy.

To blame someone requires only that an accuser voice an accusation. Being blamed for something does not mean that a wrong has been committed- only that some external party believes that a wrong has been committed and has chosen to express this sentiment. Moral blameworthiness, on the other hand, is an objective evaluation that is not concerned with "negative feelings on the part of the agent or third parties, or with outward censure including practices like punishment, or with the violation of normative standards one endorses."[6] Clearly, it is the required presuppositions of the latter that we must use to evaluate actions and decisions of historical agents. When we make this determination of blameworthiness from the ideal observer's perspective, we have created a legitimate, honest, and multi-faceted model for examining the blameworthiness of any historical figure. But first, to be morally blameworthy, an agent must perform an action:

(i) **voluntarily**

(ii) **knowing that the action is wrong**

(iii) **autonomously**- free from desires and beliefs that might inhibit the agent to act otherwise.[7]

While the voluntary nature of an action is usually fairly easy to assess, evaluating an agent's complicity with regard to the second and third prerequisites is a more challenging task. Specifically, proving that an agent knew his/her actions were morally wrong before making the causal decision requires that the historian establish that not only did such a statistically significant school of thought exist but also that the agent had the opportunity, intelligence, and occasion to be fully cognizant of its presence and position. If we can ascertain that the agent was indeed exposed to the morally legitimate position and if we can establish that the agent did have the capacity to differentiate between right and wrong, then we must hold the agent accountable for the ensuing actions. This is usually accomplished by showing that the agent was imbued with a minimum framework for discerning between right and wrong (was not in any way mentally impaired with regard to this distinction) and that s/he had access, typically through the media and peers, to morally correct viewpoints yet still made a conscious decision to pursue a course of action that s/he

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[6] Ishtiyaque Haji, "Blameworthiness, Character, and Cultural Norms," *Journal of Social Philosophy* 27 (1996), 128

[7] *Ibid.*, 128

knew was wrong. But what of the agent who acts thinking their actions and principles are correct- indeed, thinking they have a moral obligation to act in such a manner when, in fact, their moral dashboard is actually attached backwards?[8] Should we hold Karl Eichmann and Heinrich Himmler blameless simply because of the strength of their convictions? According to both Lloyd Fields and the international tribune at the Nuremburg Trials, these agents can be held morally responsible (blameworthy) because they acted "in accordance with morally bad moral principles" and agents have a moral obligation to determine the soundness of their governing principles.[9] This means that our model will not accept moral ignorance as an extenuating circumstance- we are going to hold agents responsible for recognizing and adhering to a fundamental moral rubric.

Establishing that an agent acted autonomously, a fairly recent addition to the philosophical definition of blame, is by far the trickiest criterion of the three. To prove that an agent acted autonomously requires first an inclusive definition of autonomous action. To so act, an agent must be both literally and figuratively free from any external pressures that dictate how s/he will act. In characterizing the situations under which an individual cannot be held to have acted autonomously, Aristotle likens the blameless agent to a person swept up by the wind and taken to an undesirable destination, and defines "that an act done under constraint [not autonomously] is one in which the intiative or source of motion comes from without, and to which the person compelled contributes nothing."[10] These 'winds' can include prevailing cultural norms, societal mores, economic philosophies and political attitudes. We cannot rule that an agent acted autonomously, and is thus exculpated from the charges of blameworthiness, if the agent's environment acted like Aristotle's wind. While an agent who is completely subject to exogenous factors can indeed be justly excused from taking responsibility for their actions, it is this categorization of what exactly constitutes a mitigating exogenous factor that bears additional scrutiny.

Especially in recent years, the trend amongst historians and others who seek to evaluate actions and agents of the past has been to use whatever external pressures necessary, from the direct to the tangential, to maintain a morally ambiguous historical assessment. For example, if a 16 year-old takes his father's gun and shoots a former girlfriend at school, it would initially seem

[8]It should be noted here that this was the unsuccessful defense presented by most high-ranking members of the Nazi Party at the post-WWII Nuremburg Trials.

[9]Lloyd Fields, "Moral Beliefs and Blameworthiness," *Philosophy* 69 (1994), 400

[10]Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics. Bobbs-Merrill Educational Publishing,1962 (p.52)

that the teen has committed a blameworthy act. However, following the prevailing paradigm, we should consider that this extremely fragile and sickly 16 year old, in the midst of the emotional, physical, and pyschological buffeting typical of adolescence, was physically abused by both his parents, had recently been abandoned and disowned by this girlfriend, and was facing the threat of expulsion due to his poor academic performance and lack of respect for the classroom teacher. Surely we cannot hold the 16 year old accountable for his actions on that fateful day, modern historians would posit. Likewise, it would seem unfair to blame any of the other actors- especially considering that both his parents had been physically and sexually abused as children and were passing on the only method of discipline that they knew- and that the former girlfriend had just learned that her younger brother had a terminal disease. Clearly, this example was of an extreme nature and subject to significant manipulation. Unfortunately, this is exactly what is happening to the historical past as accountable individuals- people who have made morally wrong decisions- appear to have disappeared in this modern climate of excessive contextualizing. This historiographic method, while in keeping with a magnified version of Milli Vanilli and Nietzsche's 'ressentiment' theory , serves only to successfully exculpate all historical figures from any blameworthiness whatsoever and leaves modernity with an insipid and disingenuous record. The task ahead of the ideal observer, then, is to delineate between the winds of Aristotle- the external forces that truly prevent the agent from engaging in autonomous action- and the gentle breezes that merely make one route more attractive that another.

Before we begin our case study, it is important that we pause to recapitulate what we have asserted thus far. Blame is a negative stigmatization that people, from the individual to the group, seek to avoid however possible- including when it is a charge levied at past figures and groups with whom the individual's self identity is somehow associated. Historians have traditionally catered to this pyschological and physiological need by writing blame out of historical accounts- leaving us with a blameless historical record that is noteworthy only for its lack of accountability. This paper has proposed a framework- consisting of a six-part ideal observer model and a three-part definition of blameworthiness- that seeks to counter the disturbing lack of integrity in our historical narrative. While this model is appropriately presented as an ideal, if utilized correctly it can serve an effective first step in teaching our students about how to honestly evaluate the blameworthiness of historical actors.[11]

[11] I am deeply grateful to both Professors Wade and Lang, of Trinity College, Hartford, for their invaluable assistance and contributions to this effort.

The Great Irish Famine lasted from 1845 through 1852 and resulted in a 25% net reduction in Ireland's pre-famine population. The potato blight that first struck the island in late 1845 destroyed the staple food of 3,000,000 people and began a 7 year period that resulted in over 1,000,000 deaths and 1,500,000 emigrants. The Irish potato famine presents our students with a startling disjunction: there was enough food produced in Ireland during this time period to feed the entire population yet millions starved, succumbed to disease, or were forced to flee for their lives. Current debate centers primarily around the issue of whether the British government and its agents are to be held accountable for this dichotomy or whether, given the economic exigencies of laissez-faire and the agricultural structure of rural Ireland, the famine and its effects were largely unavoidable. Tertiary accounts often inculpate some combination of the two aforementioned, the Irish middle class, the British middle class, the British media, and the Anglo-Irish landlords as the blameworthy parties. Unfortunately, this debate, rather than leading to the truth convergence that typically characterizes open debate, has been conducted largely along traditional sectarian lines and is now characterized by two entrenched and unflinching fronts. Especially in light of current attempts to ameliorate the pain of hundreds of years of adverserial relations between Protestants and Catholics, the question of accountability is one that must be addressed, and addressed honestly.

# Seeing Ireland through the Eyes of an Impartial Observer

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> If you want to know what can be done by the spirit of conquest and religious hatred combined with the abuses of aristocracy, but without any of its advantages, go to Ireland.[1]

If one knew that the above quote was dated July 9, 1835, radical groups from Ireland's turbulent past might be evoked, such as the Sons of Ireland, the Whiteboys, or even oppressed tenant farmers. However, none of these groups possessed a trace of impartiality. Each group had a rabid political agenda, and it would have been hard for each to speak with an unbiased voice. Actually, the voice belonged to the peripatetic Alexis de Tocqueville, a French man of letters who spent six weeks in Ireland diligently recording his trenchant perceptions. His astute observations provide students of the Irish Famine an outsider's view of pre-famine Ireland.

Tocqueville might be considered an unlikely candidate to impartially assess Ireland's government, countryside and people. He was born in Paris on July 7, 1805, to an aristocratic family, the youngest of three sons. He was tutored privately and attended the Metz lycée and university in Paris before attending law school. He worked as an apprentice judge in Versailles and later as a public servant, but his true mission was to write about what he observed in other countries. He wrote four books, his most famous a two volume work, *Democracy in America*, which deals with religion, class structure, racism, government, and other aspects of American democracy. It is considered to be insightful and comprehensive by modern historians and is still used today in colleges and universities to acquaint students with the roots of democracy. One of his biographers, Matthew Mancini, places him "in the small circle of political and social thinkers considered indispensable to an understanding of our modern condition."[2]

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1 Tocqueville, Alexis de, *Journeys to England and Ireland* (New Haven, Connecticut,1958), p. 122.
2 Mancini, Matthew, *Alexis do Tocqueville* (New York, 1994), p. x.

Tocqueville's quest to learn about democracy was rooted in his family's experiences in France during the tumultuous turn of the nineteenth century. During the Terror of 1793, his parents were imprisoned at Port-Royal. His maternal grandfather and great-grandfather were guillotined, and other relatives were executed. During Napolean's rise the family lived quietly in Normandy and Paris, but with his defeat in 1814 and the restoration of the Bourbons, they again achieved prominence. Tocqueville's father was appointed prefect, serving in various capitals. The Revolution of July 1830 was a turning point in Tocqueville's life. Instead of the Bourbon monarchy being replaced by a republic, as many had hoped, members of a collateral line known as the July Monarchy took the throne until the Revolution of 1848. Louis Philippe became the last king of France and in *Recollections* Tocqueville treated him with great sarcasm. However, at the time he was in government service and decided to take a required oath of loyalty. Most of the members of his family, other Bourbanites, and members of the aristocracy chose to retreat into an "internal exile."[3] The decision to take the oath did not come easily to Tocqueville, hence he wrote to his wife-to-be, "I am at war with myself."[4]

Another young French man who took the oath with reservation was Gustave de Beaumont, Tocqueville's close friend. They had held the same office in Versailles and roomed together there. Beaumont was also uncomfortable with the new regime. The two friends decided to leave France and travel to the United States to study the new democratic society there. They received a government grant to study and report on the prison system. Their trip lasted from May 1831 until February 1832, and from their observations they produced *On the Penitentiary System in the United States* and two volumes of *Democracy in America*. Their friendship lasted throughout their lives. From his deathbed Tocqueville wrote to Beaumont, "COME. COME. You alone can return us to the field. . . . Come. . . . Come,"[5] confirming their close ties.

In 1835 Tocqueville and Beaumont spent two months in England and six weeks in Ireland,

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3 Ibid., p.4.
4 Ibid., p.5.
5 Ibid.

observing the government and the people. Tocqueville's findings in Ireland surprised him and resulted in the stirring quote above. When reading his journal, one appreciates his honesty and thoroughness of reporting. Tocqueville was actually studying the situation there to try to make some sense of what he considered to be "a civilized despotism come full circle to a condition of barbarism."[6] Even though he was French and had Catholic roots, he had lost his faith at the age of sixteen, so his quest in Ireland was not one based on religion. In fact, he sought to interview members of both Catholic and Protestant faiths while visiting certain towns. His goal was to find out what was going on in the country. He was a questioner, utilizing the Socratic method to elicit answers.

In examining the section of *Journeys to England and Ireland* entitled, "Journey to Ireland (1835)," Tocqueville uses a variety of approaches to try and understand Ireland. There are interviews, conversations, sermons, reports of trials, letters in newspapers, and especially Tocqueville's own observations of the people he encounters and descriptions of the countryside, churches, grand homes and hovels. He formally interviews and identifies over twenty people, which include six Catholic priests or bishops, five Anglican or Protestant clergymen, four lawyers of both religions, a judge, a constable, a Tory party candidate, and a few other citizens he meets along the way. The same questions are raised to Catholic, Protestant, rich or poor. Subjects most often brought up include the Poor Law, land ownership, landlords, poverty, Daniel O' Connell, state support of the clergy, and the rift between the classes. When reading the selection, one is able to get a real sense of the political, economic and social situation in Ireland in 1835. Tocqueville acts as a mirror, merely reflecting what he hears and sees, frequently commenting, but rarely offering judgments.

One of the most thorough sections of Tocqueville's journey to Ireland depicts what he identifies as village X, near Tuam. He starts by explaining that he had obtained letters of introduction to officials of the towns and said that he "got them to men of all parties and especially

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6 Ibid., p. 16.

to the priests of both religions which divide Ireland."[7] He discovered that two of his letters were "addressed to the same village" and he "eagerly seized this opportunity of seeing on a very small scale the interaction of elements already observed."[8] The contrasts between the two men he meets, their activities, homes and churches illuminate the differences in class more than religion. The Catholic priest lived in "a little house, built of stone" and offered Tocqueville a modest supper before inviting him on a visitation to a dying man's house. The priest is treated with great respect by his parishioners; "the women curtseyed and crossed themselves devoutly, the men respectfully took off their hats."[9] On their way, they take a detour to see the church. First they see the ruins of the old church, destroyed by the Protestants, and "by the side of these venerable ruins stood a small and quite new Catholic chapel surmounted by a stone cross."[10]

Along the way they encounter men lying by a brook and the priest inquires whether or not they had found work that day. They answer, "We went to farmer O'Croly as your honour suggested. But farmer O'Croly himself has just been evicted from his farm by the Lord's agent."[11] The priest's response to Tocqueville is :

> Is such a state of things to be bourne, Sir? God said to man after his fall that he must earn his bread by the sweat of his brow, but here they go even further than the divine malediction. For you have just seen men who ask for nothing but to work for their living, but cannot succeed in doing so; and when you think that in Ireland more than a million of our fellows are reduced to this extremity, do you not say, as I do, that such a state of things cannot be tolerated much longer?[12]

Tocqueville responds that he has heard that the Marquis of Sligo has returned to live in his castle and if he knew what was happening would he "not seek to lessen the extreme distress which at present prevails on his domain?"[13] The priest tells him that he must be "ill informed" about the state of Ireland and that "the aristocracy is the cause of all our miseries and that it does not soften any of

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7 Tocqueville, Alexis de, *Journeys to England and Ireland* (New Haven, Connecticut, 1958), p. 160.
8 Ibid.
9 Ibid., p. 163.
10 Ibid.
11 Ibid., p. 164.
12 Ibid.
13 Ibid.

the ills it has created."[14] Tocqueville inquires if there are any Catholic landowners in Ireland, but the priest says he is talking about aristocracy, not religion, and answers, "Catholics and Protestants oppress the people in about the same way. The moment a Catholic becomes a great landowner he conceives the same egotistical dislike which seems natural to the aristocracy, for the interest of the people. Like the others he eagerly seizes on all means of enriching himself at the expense of the poor."[15]

The following day Tocqueville visits the Protestant minister. His narrative is only about a page in length and his sentences are short and choppy, but we get the picture. "Gothic style. Conservatories. Grounds. Deer. Wall all around. . . a little Gothic church with open stonework. Pretty house at its side in the middle of garden of flowers,"[16] is his description. Inside, the church has pews, carpets and a stove. The minister has just returned from a trip to Italy for his health. Tocqueville finds him to be pleasant, with good manners, and is invited to his home, but not for a meal, as the minister is dining with the lord. Tocqueville mentions that the "conversation turns on the same subjects as with the priest."[17] He elaborates little, mentioning education, the press, aristocracy, a national church, and clergy endowed by the State. By the absence of commentary, one senses that the minister's words don't mean much to Tocqueville. He ends this section with a vivid contrast: "At the top of the hill, on one side the hovels of the village and the priest's little house: on the other the mansion, the grounds, and the smoke rising through the trees around the parsonage."[18]

During Tocqueville's journey, the most frequently discussed topic is the landlord. Many times Tocqueville, himself, raises the issue and asks, "Is there a great rift between the people and the landlords?"[19] He discusses the problem with rich, poor, Catholic and Protestant. When traveling between Thomastown and Waterford, he questions a peasant about the presence of big

14 Ibid.
15 Ibid., p. 165-6.
16 Ibid., p. 173.
17 Ibid.
18 Ibid.
19 Ibid., p. 131.

landlords in the district. The answer is that "there are several, but like all the others they live in England and spend their country's money."[20] A Protestant barrister in Dublin tells him, "You cannot imagine the hatred between landlords and people. The landlords fear and distrust the people without hiding the fact. The people loathe the landlords and it would take very little time to rouse them against them."[21] Three priests in Newport agree: "These great landlords contribute nothing and do nothing to prevent the unfortunate population from starving to death."[22] When Tocqueville asks the cause, one priest answers, "There are several causes; almost all the big landowners are in difficulties themselves; moreover there is a profound hatred between them and the people . . . The people regard them as apostates or invaders and detest them. In return they have not the least sympathy for them."[23] It is clear that all parties see a problem with landlords. One Dublin lawyer goes a bit farther to try and explain that the landowners have problems, too, telling Tocqueville that "they are in great trouble themselves."[24] Tocqueville finally finds an example of a landlord who cares about his tenants at Mitchelstown. He describes the scene: "At Mitchelstown there is a splendid mansion belonging to Lord Kingston. He has 75,000 acres round the house. He lives there. I was shown a huge clearing which he has had made, and convenient cottages which he has had built for his tenants."[25] When Tocqueville asks where the lord is, he is told that he "went off his head" after being burdened with 400,000 pounds of debts without any hope of ever paying them off. With this example, Tocqueville makes it clear that being a beneficent landlord is next to impossible.

The time Tocqueville spends in Ireland is certainly pre-famine, but he skillfully observes many of the causes leading up to the famine. Many of Ireland's social problems, such as poverty, unemployment, education, violence, and morality are illustrated in his text. Political topics of the day are discussed, including repeal of the Union, the Coercion Bill, tithes, the Poor Law, and

20 Ibid., p. 137.
21 Ibid., p. 150
22 Ibid., p. 189
23 Ibid.
24 Ibid., p. 178.
25 Ibid., p. 158.

Daniel O' Connell's rise to power. Court cases are reported, through which we see how the judicial system works. Finally, we observe many different points of view concerning Catholic and Protestant issues, as well as the rift between the aristocracy and the poor. As teachers we should attempt to make use of more resources, like journals, letters and diaries to hear what the people who lived in history had to say. Tocqueville is arguably the greatest 19th century social critic, and his insights regarding pre-Famine Ireland represent a rich, lucid, and unmatched resource for conveying the social dynamics that made famine possible in Ireland. In a sense, his writings lessen our dependency upon tendentious histories produced by agenda-driven 10th century historians, be they of the nationalist or revisionist stripe.

# 'Provisions to the Suffering Poor': Irish Famine Relief and the Origins of American Foreign Aid

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During her first official trip to the United States in May, 1995, Irish President Mary Robinson made an unusual diplomatic visit while on the southwestern leg of her nationwide tour. At the small town of Durant, Oklahoma, she was received by the tribal council of the Choctaw Nation to "repay, symbolically, a 148 year-old debt" which Ireland owed to this Native American tribe. Citing their "unique example of generosity" which has since bonded the two nations together in a kind of "mutual admiration society," President Robinson thanked the Choctaws for the $710 contribution which their "Memphis Committee" for famine relief had made during the starving times of "Black '47'" This was, she proclaimed, a prime example of true humanitarianism and one which witnessed the "poor Indian sending his mite to the poor Irish."[1]

In this essay we shall explore these outpourings of American hunger relief, from both the private and public spheres, which helped to abate much of the suffering in Ireland during the height of the Great Famine. But, more importantly, we will endeavor to understand the origins of these humanitarian ventures and what motivated this major American experiment in the use of foreign aid.

In March of 1847 congressman Hannibal Hamlin of Maine raised a joint congressional resolution before the House of Representatives that created an historical precedent in American foreign policy. It authorized president James K. Polk to employ two United States warships, the *Macedonian* and the *Jamestown*, on a mission of mercy that proved to be the first organized demonstration of humanitarian aid by the American government.

Responding to reports of a growing famine crisis in the British Isles, it granted the U.S. Navy permission to transport emergency "provisions to the suffering poor of Ireland." More significantly, this resolution was part of an amendment to a House bill "making appropriations for the civil and diplomatic expenses of the Government."[2]

If we examine American motivations for organizing Irish famine relief, we must first acknowledge the true nature of Anglo-American foreign relations at the middle of the nineteenth century. The existence of numerous diplomatic conflicts with the British government throughout the Western Hemisphere have been well documented, and were caused by what one historian termed the "spasms of American expansionism." Indeed, President Polk's election in 1844 was characterized by the *London Times* as the "triumph of every thing that is worst over every thing that is best" in the United States, expressing particular concern over the escalating tensions surrounding the "Oregon Question."[3]

Of specific importance to President Polk at this time was the suppression of the Irish Directory of New York, whose aiding and abetting of treasonable activities against the British Crown in Ireland had resulted in the arrest of several Irish-American citizens and escalated into a serious international incident . Apparently, even some members of Congress had expressed support for these clandestine initiatives. This included an unusual resolution in the House of Representatives calling for the "high-minded and liberty-loving people" of Ireland to be "incorporated" into the United States by annexation at some future date.[4]

But since the cessation of open hostilities in 1815, Anglo-American peace societies had actively sought "non-violent methods for arbitrating international disputes" between the two nations. Hence, these peace activists viewed the famine crisis in Ireland as an excellent opportunity to use foreign aid as a "symbol of American rapprochement" with Great Britain. [5]

American society by the middle of the 19th century was certainly conducive to the spirit of humanitarianism that was necessary to respond to a crisis on the magnitude of the Great

Irish Famine. In New England, for instance, a peace and humanitarian movement was already fully developed by the 1840's. As a liberal reaction to the inadequacies of "deterministic Calvinism," it could trace it origins to opposition to the great European wars which had been the scourge of the previous century. Heavily influenced by the enlightened social theories so prevalent throughout Britain and France, these American peace organizations eventually found expression through a "larger philanthropic enthusiasm for perfecting man and society."[6]

Chief among these organizations was the North American branch of the Society of Friends. Staffed by dedicated men and women of Quaker heritage, they were among the first charitable groups to form a systematic relief effort for the starving inhabitants of Ireland. Prompted by early communiqués from the Quaker Relief Committees in Dublin and London outlining the desperateness of the situation, it urged its American members to exercise that "enlarged commiseration which you will doubtless feel, to aid us in this work."[7]

Because news reached Europe that the United States had been "blessed with fruitful harvests in many parts of [our] continent," particularly an abundant supply of "Indian Corn," we were seen as the logical source of foreign foodstuffs upon which famine aid could be based. As the crisis deepened, the emergency food distributed by the British government and the numerous voluntary agencies was no longer imported potatoes or wheat. Increasingly, it was American corn and corn meal. Despite the fact that relief organizations were expected to "maximize caloric intake per unit of money" by purchasing large quantities of this cereal grain, economic historians have discovered an interesting paradox. The price of potatoes in Ireland did not decline during the famine years, as could normally be expected when a nation is supplied with an alternative source of food. Broadly speaking, the persistence of strong cultural and economic factors associated with the central role of the potato in Irish peasant life meant that even the mass importation of another form of sustenance, such as American corn, was not a sufficient enough factor to drive down

the cost of their traditional food. Hence, this persistent dependence upon the potato monoculture had a deadly impact upon the Irish agrarian population.[8]

Despite this unusual set of circumstances, the demand for American foodstuffs among the Irish peasant class increased in direct proportion to the severity of the crisis. As early as 1845 Commissary-General Hewetson, chief officer of the British Relief Commission, informed Sir Robert Peel of the advantages of Indian corn purchases. "I have no hesitation in adding that Indian corn-meal in every point of view, with great economy as a leading feature, [is] one of the best descriptions of supply that can be laid in for gratuitous distribution." Therefore, by 1847 eyewitnesses to the Great Famine, such as the author Alexander Sommerville, wrote about seeing armed military escorts accompanying the wagon trains filled with American corn as they proceeded from Irish ports into the interior of the island. "Few travelers stirred anywhere," Somerville reported, "without fortifying themselves with weapons."[9]

Unfortunately, profiteering and speculation in corn imports, by both Irish and English merchants, often drove up the price of this vital product . In Cork, for instance, it was common practice among the leading Irish import houses to hold back large portions of their American cargoes to create artificially high prices. With so much "cupidity abroad", one Irish observer wrote, the price of American corn meal was "augmented by every party through whose hands it passes" before it reached the mouths of the starving poor.[10]

There can be no doubt that first-hand accounts written by Quaker missionaries describing the Famine's devastating effects upon human life were very instrumental in rallying the kind of public sympathy which resulted in direct humanitarian action. A case in point is the famous 1847 letter from the Irish Quaker Jonathan Pim to one of his American brethren, Jacob Harvey of New York. Describing a social and economic catastrophe in County Mayo which was almost beyond human comprehension, Pim soberly stated that "the destruction of the cottier population is total." Yet his account of starvation in the west of Ireland, where he said dogs were being drowned "lest they should eat anything that would

support human life," had a broader impact outside of the Society of Friends. Published and widely distributed by Harvey throughout the United States, Pim's letter helped to facilitate the formation of numerous American relief organizations and to persuaded many of them to channel their donations through the Quaker Committee in Dublin.[11]

Acting as both intermediaries for American aid and liaisons to the local government unions, the Quakers assembled an effective logistical network that probably resulted in the salvation of a significant number of Ireland's most impoverished and destitute citizens. By the creative use of publicity and appeals to the magnanimity of their cause, the Dublin and American Quaker Relief Committees solved perplexing distribution and transportation problems, while at the same time maximizing the humanitarian results. Various freight and railway companies were induce to participate in the relief effort by permitting free transport of famine supplies to eastern seaports. But when the financing of transatlantic shipping costs became a major obstacle, the international alliance of Quaker Committees had to convince the British government that it was wise fiscal policy to pay for shipments of American donations. Amounting to over 33,000 Pounds Sterling, it is also a modern example of a sovereign government's willingness to facilitate the importation of foreign aid to help alleviate a domestic crisis.[12]

Yet pacifist groups, like the Society of Friends, were not the only American religions who took direct action on behalf of the suffering Irish. When the potato crop failed, individuals stationed in Ireland such as the American Protestant evangelist Asenath Nicholson, abandoned their original mission of distributing bibles to Roman Catholics and capitalized on their experiences to encourage international participation in hunger relief. After her own merger funds ran low, Nicholson wrote to her church friends in the United States to establish a network of supplies which she personally distributed to the poor. In her correspondence, we can read detailed descriptions of the effects which hunger had upon the human body. Undoubtedly, Nicholson's recounting of the physical and psychological process by which these "walking skeletons" progressed through stages of

"inanity...passive stupidity" and finally "idiocy," garnered great sympathy from her religious community in America.[13]

Historically speaking, it should come as no surprise that New York City, with its tradition of charitable giving and as a center of humanitarian activity, was among the first urban areas in America to organize Irish famine assistance. Of the more than $395,000 of contributions raised in major U.S. cities, a full $205,000 came from the New York/Newark metropolitan region. For these reasons, popular political magazines heralded this city as the meeting place of the world. Since it was seen as the "great entrance door into the western hemisphere for all classes and conditions of men," New York was known as the immigration gateway to North America, abounding in "munificent public charities."[14]

But within this genuinely altruistic desire to prevent the starving masses of Ireland from perishing, we can detect various degrees of apprehension concerning the Famine's potential impact upon American urban society. Foreign immigration, which was "strong enough to bring an entire people to our shores" and stretch the limits of "charity to a famished nation," appears to have been a major concern of those who contributed to privately funded humanitarian aid. Fear that European famines would have a deleterious effect upon the United States can be seen in the publicity this subject received in the American press. The "extent and severity" of conditions in overseas markets, which had turned food shortages into famine crises, was believed to be the root cause of the "unparalleled immigration" from Ireland and continental Europe. It was the disruptions in the European "distributing channels of trade" that had imposed an unprecedented burden upon our "benevolent organizations." New York charities, it was predicted, would be hardest hit by this new wave of immigration. As one publication stated, of all the cities of the Atlantic world "New York is called to share with Liverpool the burden of Irish pauperism and crime."[15]

Through the orations of Famine era speechmakers we see further indications that prominent Americans were well aware of the social and political consequences of ill-advised relief schemes. In his famous address on aid for Ireland, Boston's Edward Everett

called upon the "proverbial liberality" of his fellow citizens in their response to this "mighty calamity." Still, he warned his audience that the "infirmity of human counsel" had already produced some "positive evils" throughout the Irish countryside. Since agrarian workers were unaccustomed to the directives of "public authority", Ireland's extensive government works projects where becoming, in the long-run, counterproductive. Everett cautioned that this type of solution to the country's socio-economic problems was a "very dangerous experiment upon the regular march of industry." An "astonished America" should not be "looking on paralyzed" at the situation in Ireland. Instead, a barrel of flour, purchased with charitable contributions, would provide a better answer to suffering.[16]

But perhaps nowhere in America was there a greater surge of private, public and religious support for humanitarian aid than in Boston. The city's newspapers were the first sources of information about the Irish potato blight to reach the general population of the United States in November, 1845. After a few short weeks, initial efforts aimed at helping victims of the famine began to materialize and resulted in the formation of the Irish Charitable Relief Fund. Founded by the Reverend Father Thomas O'Flaherty of the Society of Jesus, it collected $1100 in charitable contributions during its first nine days of operation. Unfortunately, the organization was mysteriously disbanded shortly afterward when optimistic, but false reports about the 1846 potato crop reached New England.[17]

Although this charitable undertaking did not go unnoticed, Boston's ethnically and religiously diverse population had to first overcome its political and social differences before the Commonwealth of Massachusetts could unite together in one organized humanitarian effort. Finally, the leadership for this ecumenical movement came from the newly appointed Bishop of Boston, Reverend John Bernard Fitzpatrick. During the first meeting of the Relief Association for Ireland, which Bishop Fitzpatrick inaugurated in the winter of 1847, he told an assembly of Catholic parishioners that it was "vain and idle...to discuss the causes to which such calamities can be traced." Instead of becoming embroiled in partisan debates over whether or not Great Britain was to blame for the lack of sufficient

famine relief, the bishop implored all persons of any Christian denomination, "whose hearts are warmed by the fire of divine charity,...[to] act in unison with us."[18]

Like the evangelist Asenath Nicholson, many prominent Protestant Boston ministers also used the power of the pulpit to motivate others to give generously for the hungry. Lamenting the military buildup taking place in Boston Harbor in preparation for the Mexican War, the Episcopal Reverend Ephraim Peabody declared that "in heavens sight it would be a nobler spectacle if listening to the cry of human want." The barren fields of Ireland, not the battlefields of Mesoamerica, was where the United States should concentrate its abundant resources. To that end, the United States government was not unsympathetic. Although, as we shall see, Congress and President Polk stopped short of providing Ireland with the kind of foreign aid that could have had a significant, lasting impact upon the outcome of the Famine.[19]

It should be noted that direct American disaster assistance to a foreign country was not unknown in the period of the Early Republic. When Caracas, Venezuela was nearly destroyed by a powerful earthquake in 1812, President James Madison persuaded Congress to appropriate $50,000 of relief funds for that stricken city. Whether or not this charitable gesture was linked to Madison's foreign policy objectives, and the fact that the Venezuelans had recently declared themselves independent from imperial Spain, remains an historical question.[20]

An examination of President Polk's personal diary leaves no doubt about his sentiments toward the Irish people. "All my sympathies are with the oppressed and suffering people of Ireland," he wrote in August, 1848, and "I sincerely wish the Irish patriots success" in their struggle to "resist the authority of the British government." However, Polk never had any serious intentions of providing substantial amounts of our government's money or materials to help the famine victims. His real objectives were diplomatic. It was the activities of Irish-American revolutionaries in Ireland that was his greatest concern, not the plight of poor Irish peasants. If these American citizens continue to violate the "penal

provisions of our neutrality laws," the president wrote, "I would be bound to see [them] faithfully executed."[21]

In February of 1847, New York congressman Washington Hunt sponsored a bill that would have appropriated $500,000 for the purchase and transportation of food, clothing and other badly needed aid directly to Ireland in American ships. He argued that the United States was intimately linked to Ireland, both historically and culturally, and that our country was in the best position to lead the crusade for famine relief. Unfortunately, the bill died in committee and never reach the House floor for a vote. When an identical bill was proposed to the Senate two weeks later it suffered a similar fate. This time the opposition was lead by Senator John Niles of Connecticut and Representative Lewis Levin of Pennsylvania. Both men insisted that "charity begins at home," and that the bill was a partisan political maneuver designed to appeal to Irish-American voters. It was legislation "disguised to afford food for party vultures," Levin exclaimed, "rather than bread for starving people."[22]

Serious division then arose in Congress over a more fundamental issue. Whether or not the constitution permitted the United States government to participant in any foreign aid ventures with public tax dollars. As a politician and statesmen who followed a strict, Jeffersonian interpretation of the constitution, President Polk had grave reservations about the legality of American financial involvement in such a projects, even though he had personally contributed his own money to Irish famine relief. Regrettably, he informed the House of Representatives that if they were to pass this type of legislation, he would be compelled to veto it on the basis of it being unconstitutional. The chief reason for taking this action, Polk wrote in his journal, was the "want of constitutional power to appropriate money for public charities either at home or abroad." It was his "solemn conviction that Congress possesses no power to use public money for any such purpose."[23]

So, in the end the U.S. Navy only provided two old obsolete vessels, manned by volunteer officers and seamen, to transport Irish famine supplies purchased with nationwide charitable contributions. Although the citizens of the United States did

contribute more aid to the starving population of Ireland than any other nation, the federal government's "laissaz faire interpretation of the constitution defeated the magnanimous call of charity" as a national priority. Ironically, when the *Macedonian* dropped anchor at Cork Harbor in July of 1847, it contained a large amount of government relief supplies from several New York cities, including Rome, Utica and Troy. Acting within their "corporate capacities" to provide public assistance to the poor, even in far away Ireland, these municipalities did not hesitate to employ city tax revenues to alleviate hunger where ever it was found. In doing so, they demonstrated a significant difference in American governmental policy during the nineteenth century. While local governments, privately financed charities and even Indian nations, were free to respond to the Irish famine crisis, the appropriation of foreign aid on the federal level remained deadlocked by endless political and constitutional debate. It was to remain an issue in American politics that would not be resolved until early in the next century.[24]

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**Notes**

[1] Robert Miller, "Ireland's President to Repay 148-Year-Old Debt to Choctaws," *Dallas Morning News* 19 May 1995, p. 3D.

[2] *The Congressional Globe*, vol. 17, new series, 1846-47 (Washington: 1847), pp. 572+574.

[3] Bradford Perkins, *The Creation of a Republican Empire, 1776-1865*, vol. 1, in *The Cambridge History of American Foreign Relations Series* (Cambridge: 1993), pp. 214+217.

[4] "Thursday, 31st August, 1848" in *The Diary of James K. Polk*, Milo Milton Quaife, ed., vol. 4, (Chicago: 1910), p. 111; "Ireland" in *The Congressional Globe*, new series no. 10, (6 January 1846), pp. 146-47.

[5] William M. Fowler, Jr., ""Sloop of War/Sloop of Peace: Robert Bennett Forbes and the USS Jamestown," *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society* 98 (1986), p. 52.

[6] Merle Eugene Curti, *The American Peace Crusade, 1815-1860* (Durham, NC: 1929), pp. 18-20.

[7] Goodbody, Rob, *A Suitable Channel: Quaker Relief in the Great Famine* (Bray, Ireland: 1995), pp. 10-11.

[8] Ibid., p. 11; Gerald P. Dwyer, Jr. and Cotton M. Lindsay, "Robert Giffen and the Irish Potato" *American Economic Review* 74.1 (March 1984), pp. 188-90.

[9] Noel Kissane, *The Irish Famine: A Documentary History*, (Dublin, 1995), p. 32.; K.D.M. Snell, ed., Introduction to *Letters From Ireland During the Famine of 1847* by Alexander Somerville (Dublin, 1925), p. 7.

[10] John O'Rourke, *The History of the Great Irish Famine of 1847* (Dublin, 1902), p. 171.

[11] Goodbody, p. 22.

[12] Ibid., p. 23.

[13] John Percival, *The Great Famine: Ireland's Potato Famine, 1845-51* (New York, 1995), pp. 69-70+75.

[14] Christine Kinealy, *This Great Calamity: The Irish Famine, 1845-52* (Boulder, CO: 1995), p. 164; "Foreign Immigration" in *American Review*, vol. 1, new series (April 1848), p. 420.

[15] *American Review* , vol. 1, p.p. 420; "Foreign Immigration" in vol. 6, (Dec. 1847), p. 634; "Ireland: Her Sufferings and Their Remedy," *The New Englander* (April 1848), p. 264.

[16] Edward Everest, *Orations and Speeches On Various Occasions*, vol. 2, (Boston: 1860), pp. 535+537.

[17] Timothy J. Sarbaugh, "A Moral Spectacle: American Relief and the Famine, 1845-1849," *Eire-Ireland* 15.4 (Winter 1980), pp. 6-8.

[18] H.A. Crosby Forbes and Henry Lee, *Massachusetts Help to Ireland During the Great Famine* (Milton, MA: Captain Robert Bennet Forbes House, 1967), pp. 11-13.

[19] Ibid., 17.

[20] Timothy J. Sarbaugh, "'Charity Begins at Home': The United States Government and Irish Famine Relief, 1845-1849," *History Ireland* 4.2 (Summer 1996), p. 32.

[21] *Diary of James K. Polk*, vol. 4, pp. 105-07.

[22] Sarbaugh, "'Charity Begins at Home'", pp. 32-33.

[23] *Diary of James K. Polk*, vol. 2, p. 396;

[24] Sarbaugh, "A Moral Spectacle", p. 14; Phyllis deKay Wheelock, "Commodore George DeKay and the Voyage of Macedonian to Ireland," *American Neptune* 13.4 (Oct. 1953), pp. 258-59.

# Modern Irish Poets: Women as Writers - Images of the Past

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From the heroic goddess myths in bardic and *aisling* poems of early literature, the concept of Ireland as feminine follows a thread throughout the country's history in the colonization of Ireland by Britain, in writings during The Great Irish Famine, and into the literature of nationalists writings. It is this concept of the "feminization" that modern Irish poet Eavan Boland seeks to revise. [1]

From the Gaelic past, the image of Ireland as a female "sovereignty," a separate and powerful entity, emerges. From at least the eighth century, the concept of "mother or woman" in Irish writings has been documented. Patricia Lysaght in *The Banshee: The Irish supernatural death messenger* (1998) states that the sovereignty of the land was perceived as a woman who conferred onto a king the sacred right to rule over it. These pre-Christian kings were "legitimized only by marriage with the goddess who - by extension of her function as Mother Earth - is at once the tribe and its territory."[2] At the same time, a counter-myth in the form of the *bean si* or banshee element is visible producing a female image that is both good and evil, an alternate "fairy omen of death as well as a guardian figure" that bestows dual roles onto the "mother concept.[3] This goddess appears in early poems and ballads as : Erie, Bamba, Bridgett, Macha, or Emer as reported in Mary Cruise O'Brian's *Women in Irish Legend, Life ,Irish Literature Studies.*.[4] C. L. Innes, a professor of post-colonial Literatures at the University of Kent, Canterbury, has examined the connection of seventeenth century Irish ballads and folk traditions to nationalist writings of the the twentieth. Innes states that poems of the aisling genre of the seventeenth century move the mother image of Ireland into the political arena. Here Ireland is envisaged as a "dream vision, a beautiful woman pleading for rescue from the invaders of the Cromwellian occupations."[5] Innes cites an aisling poet, Aogan O Rathaile (1675-1729), who shows Ireland as a beautiful, blue-eyed goddess beset by goblins, who reveals to the speaker a future for the land so terrible she will "keep from my poem for shear fear.[6] Continuing the concept of Ireland as a besieged goddess, William Heffernan's work, "Kathaleen Ny-Houlahan," Ireland becomes the "idealized figure of a woman." an image that reappears verbally and visually during the nationalist movement of the 1900s in the

[1] It is not the intent of this paper to debate critical theory or to examine feminine images in the works of Keats, Joyce or Heaney, rather to give a n historical overview with which to look at Boland's poems.
[2] C. L. Innes, *Woman and Nation in Irish Literature and Society 1880-1935* (Athens, University of Georgia Press, 1993) p.17.
[3] Ibid.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Ibid. p.18.

political writings of the Young Ireland group,[7] in the works of Yeats, Maud Gonne, and political activists especially those of Thomas MacDonagh and Padraic Pearce, Irish leaders of the Rising of 1916. In this nationalist era, a visual representation shows Ireland in the British press in the cartoon Punch, as Erin, a strong but sad goddess - all that was "feminine, courageous, and chaste about Irish women,"[8] and as Hibernia, a woman passive and despondent, and in need of rescue by England. From ancient sovereign of the land to helpless colonial, Mother-Goddess images have been part of Ireland's public identity . This is true for images emerging of Ireland in texts about The Great Famine.

Why were women the central image from texts about the Famine? Some experts suggest it was because women were the most visible victim frequently left behind as widows or women alone due to death or immigration or that women survived better than others in this population. Others suggest that this was an image chosen to communicate the horror of the witnesses who felt language was inadequate. Because the Great Hunger of 1846-1850 removed from the Irish landscape over one million people, their culture and language, primarily Gaelic, the events of these years have been obscured by silence - of victims who perished and of survivors who repressed memories in order to move forward.

Although these voices are silent, there were those who attempted to record events of this time. Margret Kelleher's *The Feminization of Famine* cites eye-witness accounts, testimonies of relief workers, and British and American travelers writing a body of famine literature that remains unresearched today. What is left are images from William Bennett's sketches (1847) of suffering children and naked women that reflect a view of female subjects particular vulnerability."[9] From this writing come images emphasizing the inability of a woman to feed her child.. Some famine observes reported suckling children at the dead mother's breast or mothers nursing adult sons so they might have strength to work for relief for for the family.[10] Kelleher reports that perhaps the best- known image of the famine appeared in the *Illustrated London News* from February, 1847. James Mahony's illustration of a woman carrying the corpse of her child entitled, "Woman Begging at Clonakelty," raised famine images to "iconic, with strong evocations of the Madonna and Child."[11] Other images include those of heroic acts of self-sacrifice of women as martyr also survive in these texts. Kelleher suggests that the image of the "maternal body" as life and nurturer has been replaced by the image of death.[12] There were also reported atrocities among the starving. Kelleher relates accounts of a Skibbereen doctor who observed parents "snatching food from their starving children and those of parents "looking on the putrid bodies of their offspring without . . . a symptom of sorrow."[13] Not only has the maternal body failed, but the image of the

[7] Young Ireland was a group of nationalists whose newspaper, *The Nation*, encouraged an Ireland free from religious or political bias.
[8] Ibid. p.18.
[9] Margret Kelleher, *The Feminization of Famine: Expressions of the Inexpressible?* (Durham, Duke University Press, 1997) p. 19.
[10] Ibid. p.18.
[11] Ibid. p.23.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Ibid.p. 24.

guardian/mother has deteriorated into the image of the banshee or prophetess of death from ancient legends.

There exists a body of fictional work dealing with the famine including William Carlton's *The Black Prophet* (1846), Anthony Trollope's *Castle Richmond*, and Annie Keary's *Castle Daly* (1875) among others, that also continue into the twentieth century in the revival period of literature. From Lady Gregory and Keats' efforts in drama in *Cathleen ni Houlihan* where Ireland appears as both old woman and beautiful queen violated by England, to Maude Gonne's essays, images of The Great Hunger continue. In Liam O'Flaherty's novel, *Famine*, in 1937 to modern playwright, Tom Murphy's drama of the same name, Kelleher characterizes famine influences as "more oblique" references as nationalist themes of "sacrifice and renunciation." In this era, famine images of hunger and starvation become more related to its great cost on the culture and psyche of the country; however, in the final view, the "slaughter or sacrifice of a female innocent as a sign of famine horror is one of the most frequent in twentieth century representations."[14]

There was one voice on the literary scene who rejected the politicization of his own experiences. Patrick Kavanagh, born in 1904 into a rural family, "represented a class which was falsely depicted and inaccurately politicized" by the writers like Yeats, and Synge.[15] According to poet and critic, Eavan Boland, Kavanagh's poetic vision was private, a rural experience that "was both glamorized and distorted" much like the experiences Irish women who found themselves part of the "iconic structure of the Irish poem."[16] Kavanagh's poem, "The Great Hunger," is a "rejection of the soft elegy of the British pastoral and the social protest of the Irish one but it voices the painful connection between private suffering and conflicting issues of faith, history, and vision."[17]

It is the voices of Ireland's modern poets, like Eavan Boland, that reject such romantic and simplistic images of women that have defined the identity of Ireland. According to Boland, it is precisely this image that "fuses the national to the feminine" that must be shattered. She believes that this fusion oversimplifies both issues and "reduces complex feelings, aspirations, and lives of real women."[18] In *A Kind of Scar: The Woman Poet in In National Tradition*, Boland sees the "underlying fault of Irish poetry is taking "emblematic women, appearing as Dark Rosaleen, the old Woman of Roads, or Cathleen Ni Houlihan, and making them "passive projections of a national idea."[19] She has said that changing a defeated nation into a triumphant woman constitutes an ethical loss: "gone were the human truths of survival and humiliation " She sees images as truth, not hollow ornaments to change or subvert truth.[20]

In attempts to show the hollowness of woman as national image, Boland frequently

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[14] Ibid. p.131.
[15] Eavan Boland, *Object Lessons* ( New York, W.W. Norton and Co., 1995) p.198.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Patricia L. Hagen and Thomas W. Zelman, "'We were Never on the Scene of the Crime': Eavan Boland's Repossession of History, *Twentieth Century Literature* (Winter 1991) pp. 442-453.
[19] Eavan Boland, *A Kind of Scar: The Woman Poet in a National Tradition* (Dublin: Attic Press, 1989) p.13.
[20] Ibid.

juxtaposes the old and the new by mimicking the nationalist cry of Padrick Pearse's "I am Ireland." In this poem, Pearse's speaker, the people, calls forth the glory of the ancient Old Woman of Beare who bore Cachalain the valiant but who "sold their own mother" by submitting to England's rule. In Boland's version entitled "Mise Eire,"(Gaelic for " I am Ireland") evokes Ireland's goddess myth and immediately in the first line, the speaker says, "I won't go back to it-- . . ."[21] The speaker refuses to return to "old dactyls" or "oaths made/ by the animal tallows/ of the candle" referring to the verse foot of classical, elegiac poems used by Gaelic writers(but difficult to do in English) and to ancient times of tribal heroes and myth.[22] In the second stanza, the speaker sees the heroic images of Ireland have "scalded memory" or burned out the real events. She sees the ancient songs have not told the unspoken, unromantic truth but work as "bandages" on history to hide the scars, wounds and "crimes." Instead of "I am Ireland," the speaker says, "I am woman--." In stanza four and five, she appears as an image of the prostitute in garrison precincts and the immigrant mother on board the *Mary Belle*, "holding her half-dead baby to her/as the wind shifts east/ and north over the dirty/water of the wharf." These are the real images of Ireland whose "guttural" Gaelic language is a badge of shame while "a new language is a kind of scar/and heals after a while/ into a passable imitation/. . . ", not the traditional pictures of Ireland as a woman. According to Hagen and Zelman, the "brutal roots" of the women in this poem "shatter the poetic idea of a defeated nation reborn as a triumphant woman insisting instead on bearing witness to the real defeats of Irish history, the real sufferings of Irish women."[23]

There are, however, those that doubt Boland's view of making sense of personal history as a new history for Ireland. Sheila Conboy cites Edna Longley in *From Cathleen to Anorexia: The Breakdown of Ireland:*

> Boland's new Muse, supposedly [is] based on the varied historical experience of Irish women," like the Achill woman who speaks of the famine. The 'real women of an actual past' are subsumed into a single emblematic victim-figure: 'the women of a long struggle and a terrible survival', 'the wrath of grief of Irish history'.[24]

Images that simplify and distort are exactly what Boland herself wants to subvert. She sees her identification with the past as an acknowledgement of a complex Irish culture. In an interview cited by Conboy, Boland states:

> Irish nationhood -- for more than a century -- has been a constellation of tensions and fragmentations. If we want that nation then we have to respect the different cultures within it. As poets and writers we ought to understand those cultures.[25]

It is in the concrete, ordinary objects of lives that discloses hidden Irish history and more

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[21] Eavan Boland, *Outside History, Selected Poems 1980-1990,* (New York, W. W. Norton and Co.,1990) p. 78.

[22] Kerry E. Robertson, "Anxiety, influence, Tradition and Subversion in the Poetry of Eavan Boland. *Colby Quarterly* (December, 1994) pp. 264-278.

[23] Patricia L. Hagen and Thomas Zelman, "'We Were Never on the Scene of the Crime,'" p. 447.

[24] Sheila C. Conboy, "Eavan's Boland's Topography of Displacement," *Eire - Ireland* (Fall 1994) pp. 137-146.

[25] Ibid. p.145.

*importantly, it is the concrete of her poetry that reveal "missing stories and missing histories."*[26] Boland suggests that writers like herself should "establish a discourse with the idea of nation . . . by exploring the emblematic relationship between feminine experience and a national past."[27]

As an example of using a concrete, personal experience to accurately portray a real woman, not the romanticized goddess, Boland explores a mother/daughter relationship in terms of past history. In "The Making of an Irish Goddess," the speaker, trying to locate her own daughter in the distance among other children, imagines herself the mother of Ceres who disappears into Hell. In a rejection of the mythic story where the earth is restored when the daughter is returned, the antithesis of goddess, Boland's speaker, sees herself, "neither young now or fertile,/and with the marks of childbirth/still on it. The earth, like herself, is not the land of the myth. Instead, it is "an accurate inscription of that agony:

> the failed harvests,
> the fields rotting to the horizon,
> the children devoured by their mothers
> whose souls, they would have said,
> went straight to hell,
> followed by their own.[28]

The speaker must look upon her earth, her history of famine and with it, the unnatural acts of starving mothers, no longer the guardian/nurturer but the banshee image of death messenger. These were mothers blamed and cast into sin and hell as was suggested by some famine texts. To Boland, this is myth of the real Irish Goddess who finds her daughter, only to realize that the child has her back turned, looking toward another world.

Boland's view that "the poet, especially the woman poet, has an ethical obligation to de- and re-construct those constructs that shape literary tradition, bearing witness to the truths of experience suppressed, simplified, and falsified by the 'official" record," appears in a poem in the collection, In A Time of Violence.[29] In the poem, "That the Science of Cartography is Limited," maps fail . According to Raschke, " maps, a metonymic for a silenced Irish history, distorts the story" and are insufficient to "unveil the hidden stories of Irish history."[30] The speaker in the poem discovers the stones she sees in the wood in Connacht during a pleasant outing with her lover, are a famine road. As she listens to a part of history she has never known, she learns:

> . . . rough-cast stone had
> *disappeared into as you told me*
> *in the second winter of their ordeal, in*
>
> 1847, when the crop had failed twice,

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[26] Debrah Raschke, "Eavan Boland's *Outside History* and *In a Time of Violence:* Rescuing Women, the Concrete, and Other Things Physical from the Dung Heap," *Colby Quarterly* (June, 1996) pp.136-137..
[27] Boland, *A Kind of Scar*, p. 8.
[28] Boland, *Outside History*, pp. 38-39.
[29] Boland, *A Kind of Scar*, p.7.
[30] Debrah Raschke, "Eavan Boland's *Outside History* and *In a Time of Violence*," p. 136.

Relief Committees gave
the starving Irish such roads to build.

Where they died, there the road ended

and ends still and when I take down
the map of this island, it is never so
I can say here is
the masterful, the apt rendering of
the spherical as flat, nor
an ingenious design. . . [31]

The speaker realizes that the "official " map, like histographies or reports, withholds the truth about the land which lies in the experiences of the people. She will never again mistake "the line which says woodland and cries hunger/. . . will not be there."

In using famine images, Hagen and Zelman suggest, Boland can "offer us a sense of the past, which allows us to view and situate ourselves, individually and collectively, as heirs to tradition,"[32] not as icons or suffering mouthpieces for injustice, but as individuals. In reshaping the Irish tradition in poetry, Boland and others like her, insist that the lost voices of history be recuperated. In the conclusion of *Outside History*, the poem of the same name describes eloquently what Boland chooses:

Out of myth into history I move to be
part of that ordeal
whose darkness is

only now reaching me from those fields,
those rivers, those roads clotted as
firmament with the dead.

How slowly they die
as we kneel beside them, whisper in their ear.
And we are too late. We are always too late.

[31] Boland, *In a Time of Violence*, pp. 7-8.
[32] Patricia L. Hagen and Thomas Zelman, "'We Were Never on the Scene of the Crime'," p.443.

# "The Fingertips of Instinct"

The Archaeology of the Great Famine

Eileen Finn Jundzil

Worcester Vocational High School

The whole landscape a manuscript
We had lost the skill to read,
A part of our past disinherited:
But fumbled, like a blind man,
Along the fingertips of instinct.
"The Rough Field" by John Montague

Can there actually be a designated area of historical archaeology, which purports to be dedicated to that specific area of Irish history covering the years of 1845 to 1852? Can a phenomenon like the Great Irish Famine be substantiated by means of the surviving physical evidence from this era, the greatest social disaster of the nineteenth century?

One fact that clearly emerges is that the landscape does not lie. Just as the old cultivation ridges from this era can be seen on most Irish hillsides, especially at sunset, or when there has been a light fall of snow, so too the one and a half million victims of the Great Famine can be overheard to still possess the rural Irish landscape as they beckon to us from graveyards, famine pits, ditches, fields and the ruins of dwelling houses.

In fact, it is difficult not to feel the presence and vitality of these long silenced souls when walking along a path through one of the Famine villages that dot the western countryside. Up on the shoulder of Mount Mweelrea, even an untrained ear such as mine can easily overhear the laughter of young children, the unfinished sentence, the scolds of the nagging wife, and the response of her husband breaking into loud full song as he ignores her in reply.

For more than two decades, my travels and experiences in Ireland have highlighted both the denial and the ambivalence that the native Irish bring to this watershed in their social and economic history.

During several of my trips to the Westport-Louisburgh area of west Mayo, I have asked my relatives to travel to the usually deserted beach known as the Silverstrand, about ten miles from Louisburgh to spend an afternoon with me. The first time, it was the young children who were dispatched to accompany the Yank. Two decades later, the children now grown, I was told that "the day is not fine." Their puzzling distance was perplexing but I learned to just accept it.

One year ago, I discovered the real reason for their absence and lack of enthusiasm---a full twenty years later and at a distance of some 5000 miles away. I had been blithely sunning myself and nonchalantly relaxing beside the bones of my Mayo ancestors.

During the winter of 1847, more commonly referred to as Black '47, the people in this area were too weak to bury their dead in the frozen ground. Undeterred, they piled their famine dead in a fifteen-foot high stack on the beach. In an effort to both dignify and mark the deaths, the bodies were weighted down with large rocks to save them from the crush of the Atlantic. And even today, more than a century and a half later, human bones mixed in with stone can be seen churning about as the seawater envelops both.

The legacy of the heavy heart with which this monument was undertaken then--an unspeakable solution to an unimaginable problem—survives today in the reticence of my relatives to even acknowledge this ghastly remnant of the Great Famine's legacy. Yet these are the same folks who had no difficulty pointing out the Westport workhouse or the Famine wall that bisects Croagh Patrick and yet leads to nowhere on this holy reek. And yet it is just another physical remnant of the Famine, an example of the total absurdity of some of the outdoor relief

projects that sapped the meager stores of energy of the "able-bodied", yet malnourished populace, who worked twelve hour days, six days a week for two pence a day for the welcome ladle of stirabout in the evening.

But how do you go about documenting and recording through archaeology the everyday life of the long silenced Famine poor? How do you archive and chronicle the texture of the everyday lives of a people who seemingly had no voice while they lived and whose Irish language and illiteracy further increases their muteness to the modern day historian of today?

I was fortunate to visit the Famine Museum at Strokestown Park in Roscommon during the summer of 1994, shortly after it was opened. And while I spent several hours wandering through the exhibits on the converted stable grounds area, I cannot recall, these four years later, a single object or artifact that was either memorable or captured my imagination. It relied heavily on posterboard displays—text and documentary sources with agricultural tools and a few prized photos thrown into the museum stew.

Then suddenly an epiphany! The Famine poor had no worldly possessions. There is no reason why you would ever need a glass case hooked to a security system at Strokestown! It also serves to explain why almost all of the highly rich and expansive bulk of current archaeological fieldwork in Ireland is still concerned with prehistoric Ireland. The guideline is that excavation precedes the period of 1750. The booty unearthed is obviously far more valuable.

The Duke of Wellington once said, "There never was a country in which poverty existed to the extent to which it existed in Ireland." An 1837 survey of possessions in a town in Donegal revealed its 9000 inhabitants owned 10 beds and 93 chairs; in other words, for every 97 people, there was one chair, and for every 900 people, one bed.[1]

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[1] *When Ireland Starved*, Radharc Films, New York, 1992.

Charles Orser, an historical archaeologist, who asks in an essay "Can there be an Archaeology of the Great Famine", is only one of two primary researchers currently excavating a Famine archaeological site. Orser points out that the archaeology of the Great Famine is only in its infancy and that extensive work lies ahead. However, this appears to be an exciting time as many historical archaeologists now begin to shift their attention away from the culture of the elite to the poor, disenfranchised, and the illiterate. And it is quite likely that "the inarticulate", (a term coined by the cultural anthropologist, Margaret Mead, in the 1950's) may finally be given a voice by the objects they discarded a century and a half ago.[2]

Orser provides powerful analogies between the Irish cottiers and the African-American slaves. And, notably, he has conducted excavations on the sites of both of these groups of people. Despite their very different histories and cultures, they were contemporaries in history, who shared similar and striking coincidences. Irish coffin ships had conditions as poor as the slave ships. Additionally, journalists, writers, and historians who visited both groups described their living quarters in the same exact eyewitness terms, miserable one-room hovels.

Travelers who observed both groups further reinforce these parallels. In 1749, the Anglican bishop and philosopher, George Berkeley, wrote: "The negroes in our Plantation have a saying—If negro was not negro, Irishman would be negro." The English author and staunch anti-Catholic clergyman, Charles Kingsley, noted during his 1860 Sligo visit that he was haunted by the human chimpanzees he saw: "to see white chimpanzees is dreadful; if they were black, one would not feel it so much." And, of course, Punch, not to be outdone, rose to the occasion two years later by referring to the Irish as "A creature manifestly between the Gorilla and the Negro."

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[2] Charles E. Orser, "Can there be an Archaeology of the Great Famine?" *Fearful Realities,* (Dublin. Irish Academic Press, 1996), p. 78.

Orser wisely notes that extreme poverty and dispossession probably look the same everywhere.[3]

## GORTTOOSE, COUNTY ROSCOMMON

Gorttoose is a townland just east of Strokestown. Originally the property of the O'Connor Roe family, it was confiscated by Cromwell and granted to Nicholas Mahon, one of his officers, and subsequently settled by cottiers around 1780. It would later become the property of the infamous and soon to be assassinated Famine landlord, Major Denis Mahon. Of the 3,000 Irish whom he would evict during the Great Famine, some 35 families representing 185 people came from the townland of Gorttoose.

Assisted by handwritten notes from Strokestown Park House, as well as the 1837 Ordnance Survey maps, Orser has been able to identify the head tenants of the six clusters of one and two story buildings each in the townland. Surface survey, a chemical soil test, and oral interviewing also helped pinpoint these abandoned sites at Gorttoose. Eventually, when the excavation of the head tenant sites is complete, that will then help to lead Orser and his staff to the nearby cottier homes. A comparative study will then be conducted on the remains of the head-tenant and sub-tenant homes.

Orser's findings to date have dispelled the commonly held idea that a material culture really did not exist in these clusters. "With students from Illinois State University, I began to investigate Gorttoose. Cottiers, the poorest of Irish farmers, have long been thought to have had no significant material culture. I wanted to see if that was so. Our initial investigations have focused on the homesite of a head tenant, who rented land from Mahon, lived on a small parcel of it, and sublet the rest to cottiers. The results indicate that an abundant material culture was available in and around Gorttoose in the early nineteenth century. We have discovered that the

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[3] Ibid. pp.82-84.

people who lived at the site owned several kinds of decorated dishes, many varieties of bottles, and numerous metal tools. Their possessions can be expected to be more extensive than those of the cottiers, but what they owned does provide clues about tenant material culture in general."[4]

THE DESERTED VILLAGE, SLIEVEMORE, ACHILL ISLAND, COUNTY MAYO

The excavation of the Deserted Village was begun in 1991 and it has continued each summer in July and August since then. The Achill Archaeological Summer School and the Mayo County Council fund the excavation. Theresa McDonald is the archaeologist in charge.

The Deserted Village lies on the south-west facing slopes of Slievemore Mountain, which is 2204 feet high and it stretches for about 1.5 km hugging the 200 foot contour. The site consists of 74 upstanding buildings constructed in two distinct groups, Toir, or the west village, and Toir Reabhach, the east village. While the village dates to the immediate pre-Famine era, that would represent its latest phase of settlement, since there is evidence in the form of megalithic tombs, that activity and occupation in this area extends back to the Neolithic period of some 5500 years ago. A number of hut platforms located at the 400-foot contour, together with associated pre-bog field systems probably represent Bronze Age activity of 3500 years ago.

Other monuments on Slievemore include the remains of an Iron Age Caher (stone fort), an Early Christian church and cross slabs and probable Anglo/Norman structures, all of which represent continuous occupation of the area for 6000 years.

An important feature of the Deserted Village is the associated field system of lazy-beds (ridge and furrow). The farming practice revolved around the system of booleying or migration, where livestock is moved from a lowland, usually permanent, village to summer pasture, frequently in the mountains.[5]

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[4] On line, Archaeology Abstracts: Roscommon, http://www.archaeology.org/9709/abstracts/ireland.html.
[5] On line, Achill Archaeological Summer School, http://www.tmacdonald.iol.ie.

Also of significance is the impact of the Achill Mission Society headed by the Reverend Edward Nangle, a Protestant evangelist who preached against Catholicism during the Famine. He figured prominently in the nearby area of Dooagh on Achill, where he established a model farm, several schools, a hospital, a hotel for his many visitors, and a printing office for his newspaper, the Achill Missionary Herald. He made hundreds of temporary converts out of the local people, who were only too aware that they were cut off from any other direct relief and totally isolated from the mainland with Westport over thirty miles away.[6]

So far the excavation has just been confined to Slievemore, where there have been numerous finds of 19th-century delftware and glass, among other things, but the excavation is on-going in nature and I feel confident that other revealing material goods will be discovered.

## CONCLUSION

The perception that Irish peasants were completely without a material culture may be a pervasive idea, but, as the findings of these two separate Famine era excavations indicate, it is both an unrealistic, as well as an illogical, assumption to subscribe to their culture.

Broken ceramic dishes, discarded smoking pipes, pieces of bottles, and lost buttons are the physical clues that help to relate the personal daily life of those who lived during the Great Famine.

The rising popularity and growth of historical archaeology in the last decade of this century offers the hope of finally giving the disenfranchised an opportunity to speak, a chance denied to them in life.

And while the bulk of Irish archaeology will almost certainly continue to be focused on prehistoric ringforts and standing stones, archaeologists like McDonald and Orser deserve our

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[6] John Percival. *The Great Famine,* (New York, Viewer Books, 1995), pp.77-82.

praise. And as Orser himself notes: "At present, the historical archaeology of the Great famine is only a promise. But it is a promise with thrilling potential and unbounded opportunity."[7]

[7] Op Cit. Charles Orser. p. 89.

"Twenty thousand of them died in the coffinships...."
Joyce's Ulysses: (12:327)

# Joycean Allusions to "The Great Irish Famine (1845-1852)"

Brother Edward Kent
St. Francis Preparatory

Margaret Kelleher's The Femininization of The Famine states "the 1840's famine is curiously absent from the work of Joyce - a writer separated from its events by only one generation."[1] Actually Joyce's famine allusions and subtleness often go unnoticed. "I want the reader to understand through suggestion rather than direct statement."[2] For example, the initial story in Dubliners ("The Sisters") the narrator states "When I came downstairs to supper... my aunt was ladling out my stirabout..."[3] 'Stirabout' or Indian corn ("Peel's Brimstone") is famine food. Christine Kinealy says that the British imported Indian corn to Ireland because it was cheaper than oatmeal.[4]

Again on page one the reference to Cotter and his "endless stories about the distillery"[5] suggests the Guinness Brewery in Dublin. Gearoid Otuathaigh's Ireland before the Famine states that "the house of Guinness was increasing

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[1] Margaret Kelleher, The Femininization of Famine (Cork, 1997), pp. 4-5.
[2] Dominic Manganiello, Joyce's Politics (Boston 1980), p. 95.
[3] James Joyce, Dubliners (New York, 1991), P.I. Future References are from this edition.
[4] Christine Kinealy, The Great Calamity: The Irish Famine 1845-1852 (Dublin, 1995), p.68.
[5] Joyce, "The Sisters", p.1.

export as well as home consumption"[6] Many characters in Dubliners have trouble with alcohol, reinforcing the stereotypical image of the drunken Irishman.

And in "Eveline" whenever Mr. Hill was asked about the yellow photograph of a priest he simply said, "He's in Melbourne now"[7] implying all the negative associations Australia has for the Irish people, especially during the famine years.

Being born into a politically active middle class family, Joyce quickly learned about the famine stories of Charles Stewart Parnell (1846-1891). Parnell, though a wealthy Protestant landowner was noted for his kindness and sympathetic treatment of the farmers. He spoke and wrote in favor of the landowners allowing tenants to buy back their lands and his disapporoval of landowners evicting starving families. To help the farmers resist, he and Michael Davitt (1846-1906) established the Irish Land League. [8] Joyce's Portrait contains many references to Parnell and Davitt and Joyce's favorite story in Dubliners "Ivy Day in the Committee Room" is a tribute to Parnell. Parnell was always Joyce's hero.

In a Portrait, young Stephen would take long walks with his father and Uncle Charles who would tell him stories about Parnell and Irish history. A friend of Joyce's father John Kelly who appears in Portrait as John Casey was in prison several times for Land League agitation.[9] In Portrait he tells Stephen that 3 fingers were permanently cramped for making a birthday present for Queen

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[6] Gearoid Otuathaigh, Ireland before the Famine (Dublin, 1990), p.124.
[7] Joyce, "Eveline", p.121.

Victoria.[10] Ironically Mr. Casey loves Parnell but advocates violence, the opposite of Parnell's philosophy. In James Joyce and the Question of History, James Fairhall states: "Stephen's rejection of violence stems from Joyce's self identification with Parnell."[11]

Parnell's philosophy of non violence is echoed in Joyce's story "An Encounter". The young narrator (Joyce) joins in playing wild Cowboy and Indian games like "running the gauntlet of the rough tribes" (Araby)[12] although he admits he played these games because of peer pressure. He was "afraid to seem too studious."[13] Joyce says rough games were "remote from my nature."[14] He refers to himself as the "reluctant Indian."[15]

Later in "An Encounter" when Mahoney proposes to "charge" the kids throwing stones at them, the narrator talks Mahoney out of fighting saying "they're (kids) too small."[16] Protestant and Catholic kids in Belfast still throw stones at one another.

Parnell's spirit symbolized by the dying fire, is rekindled in "Ivy Day in the Committee Room". "Since the weather was inclement and his boots let in the rain, Mr. O'Connor spent a great part of the day sitting by the fire,"[17] instead of

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[8] Kerby Miller, Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and The Irish Exodus to North America, (New York, 1985), p.
[9] Richard Ellman, James Joyce, (New York, 1959), p.24.
[10] Joyce, A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man (New York, 1994), p.17.
[11] James Fairhall, James Joyce and the Question of History, (London, 1993), p.124.
[12] Joyce, "Araby", p.15.
[13] Joyce, "An Encounter", p.8.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Ibid. p. 10.
[17] Joyce, "Ivy Day in the Committee Room," p. 79.

canvassing for votes. Parnell delivered fiery campaign speeches in the pouring rain.

Henchy said "the King's coming here will mean an influx of money... Mr. O'Connor said 'Why should we welcome the King of England. Didn't Parnell... 'Parnell' said Mr. Henchy 'is dead'." "Mr. Henchy spat so copiously that he nearly put out the fire, which uttered a hissing protest."[18]

When Joyce attended Belvedere Jesuit, he wore an "ivy leaf" in his lapel to commemorate the Oct. 6th anniversary of Parnell's death. He received detention for being out of dress code. When Joyce's father died in 1931, Joyce sent an ivy wreath from Paris.[19]

Famine echoes are also heard in the first sentence of "Araby". "North Richmond Street, being blind, was a quiet street except at the hour when the Christian Brothers School set the boys free."[20] Gifford notes the Christian Brothers were founded in Waterford (1802) by Edmund Ignatius Rice (1762-1844) when it was illegal for children in Ireland to be given a Catholic education. The schools were supported by public contributors and charged very low tuition.[21]

Jackson adds that Daniel O'Connell contributed to the school's building fund and laid the foundation stone in 1828, the year before Catholic emancipation. Joyce and his brother, Stanislaus attended the school in 1893.[22] Blessed Edmund Rice is expected to be declared a Saint in Catholic Liturgy.

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[18] Ibid. p. 87
[19] John Jackson and Bernard McGinley, James Joyce's Dubliners: Illustrated (New York, 1993), p. 107.
[20] Joyce, "Araby", p. 15.
[21] Don Gifford, Joyce Annotated, (California, 1982), p. 43.
[22] Jackson and McGinley, p. 21.

Joyce was educated by the Jesuits in Clongowes. Belvedere and University College, Dublin. His father wanted the best education for his son and the Jesuits were the best. In "An Encounter" Joyce's classmate "fat Leo" gets in trouble for reading a comic book in history class. "What is this rubbish?"... APACHE CHIEF... Is this what you read instead of studying Roman History?... I'm surprised at boys like you, educated, reading such stuff. I could understand it if you were National School boys."[23] Gifford says the National School is the Irish counterpart of the American Public School. The National Schools were dominated by an English, Protestant point of view and were suspected by the Irish as being part of a British plot to control Ireland religiously, socially, politically and economically.[24]

Fr. Butler's condescending remark implies that all public school students are ignorant. Later in the story when Mahoney and the narrator (Joyce) "miched" school, Mahoney chases a crowd of ragged girls, with his unloaded sling shot. Two ragged boys then began to fling stones at us screaming 'Swaddlers! Swaddlers!' thinking we were Protestants because Mahoney... wore the silver badge of a Cricket Club in his cap."[25]

Gifford says "swaddlers" is a contemptuous Catholic term hurled at Protestants. Catholic kids play Irish football or rugby, they don't play cricket. [26]Jackson comments that "cricket" was a Protestant game implying that the elite Jesuit schools exacerbated class differences by imitating the English educational

[23] Joyce, "An Encounter", p. 9.
[24] Gifford, p. 36.
[25] Joyce, "An Encounter", p. 10.

system.[27] Ironically, Joyce loved playing cricket. "The sounds of the cricket bats, pick, pack, pock, puck."[28]

Famine history is summarized in Ulysses when the citizen in Barney Kiernan's pub reminds Bloom of the famine atrocities. "They were driven out of house and home in the black 47. Their mud cabins were laid low by the batteringram and the Times rubbed its hands and told the whitelivered Saxons there would soon be a few Irish in Ireland as redskins in America. They drove out the peasants in hordes. Twenty thousand of them died in coffinships."[29]

When Bloom sees how thin Dilly DeDalus looks, he thinks: "Good Lord, that poor child's dress is in flitters. Underfed she looks too."[30] Bloom then recalls "they used to give pauper children soup to change to Protestants in the time of the potato blight."[31] Bloom is correct. Noel Kissane states that same evangelical groups distributed soup on condition to conversion to the Protestant faith.[32]

"On the doorstep he felt in his hip pocket for the latch key. Not there...Potato I Have." (4-72/73)[33] Stephen's "stirabout" and Bloom's "potato",subtle synedoches, reminders of the Irish Famine.

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[26] Gifford, p. 38.
[27] Jackson and McGinley, p. 14.
[28] Joyce, Portrait, p. 40.
[29] Joyce, Ulysses (New York, 1934), 12:324-27.
[30] Ibid. 8:41.
[31] Ibid. 8:1071-73.
[32] Noel Kissane, The Irish Famine (Dublin, 1995), p. 86.
[33] Joyce, Ulysses, 4: 72-3.

# THE GREAT FAMINE
# AND
# IRISH-AMERICAN IDENTITY

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In the United States today there is a new interest in the Irish Famine and its impact. Famine memorials are being erected, and some state legislatures have mandated or recommended a curriculum for teaching the Famine in their public schools. As students begin to study events surrounding the Irish Famine of the 1840's one lesson that can be learned is how important this Famine has been in shaping the identity of Irish-Americans for over one hundred years.

One reason for the identification of Irish-Americans with the Famine is the sheer number of immigrants to the United States because of the Famine. Although there had been a steady stream of Irish, both Protestant and Catholic, into the United States before the 1840's, that stream became a flood as a result of the Famine. Over a million Irish came into the United States during the years of the Famine, 1846-1849, and, because of changes in rural Ireland as a result of the Famine, another 3.5 million had followed by 1921. By 1900 there were more Irishmen in the United States than in Ireland.[1] The majority of the Irish who came in the Famine and post-Famine years tended to be poorer than those who had immigrated earlier. Additionally, they were overwhelmingly Catholic and came mostly from the western, Irish-speaking parts of Ireland which were hardest hit by the Famine.[2] It is the experiences of these Irish immigrants which shaped Irish-American identity.

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[1]Kirby Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles*, (New York, 1985), p. 346.
[2]Miller, pp.350-352.

Because of the Famine and post-Famine Irish, Irish-American identity has been a Catholic identity. Historian Lawrence McCaffrey explains how the American experience strengthened the ties between the Irish and the Catholic Church.

> In urban ghettos, cut off from their traditional rural culture, the Irish in the United States felt lonely and isolated. .. Catholicism became the glue of the Irish community, the one familiar institution bridging rural Ireland and urban America. It consoled Irish misery, disciplined Irish conduct, and fused people from different provinces, counties, townlands, and villages in Ireland into an Irish-American ethnicity.[3]

Irish Catholicism was transformed by the 1870's when Cardinal Paul Cullen consolidated in Ireland what has been called a "Devotional Revolution." Previously, Irish Catholicism was "loosely structured, closely identified with the daily life of the Irish peasants, and more sensitive to Irish needs than to Vatican policy. It was a rural, richly communal, traditional peasant religion stripped of the cultural richness normally associated with Catholicism."[4] According to Emmet Larkin, the Famine made the Irish people psychologically and socially ready for a great evangelical revival. [5] Cullen improved clerical education and discipline, enlarged the number of religious vocations, and increased attendance at Mass and religious devotions, and strengthened ties with the Vatican. Under Cullen's leadership Irish Catholics became "the most devout, financially generous, obedient, and loyal members of the Roman fold."[6] Because of this Devotional Revolution, Irish Catholicism came to personify both religious authoritarianism and a new Puritanism.

Within a very short time, Irish priests and nuns, along with the continuing numbers of Irish immigrants, brought this Irish Catholicism to the United States. By the end of the nineteenth century the Irish had become the dominant force in American Catholicism. They built churches,

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[3]Lawrence J. McCaffrey, *Textures of Irish America,* (New York, 1992)), p.59.
[4]Marjorie R. Fallows, *Irish Americans: Identity and Assimilation,* (New Jersey, 1979), p.130.
[5]Emmet Larkin, *The Historical Dimensions of Irish Catholicism,* (Washington, DC., 1984), p.648.
[6]Lawrence McCaffrey, *Irish Catholic Diaspora in America,* (Washington, DC., 1997), p.81.

parochial schools and later Catholic colleges and universities. Their sons and daughters became priests and nuns, and "the pietism, legalism. and sexual obsessions of Irish priests, nuns, and brothers have permeated Catholic education from elementary school through college and university."[7] Even today, the percentage of Irish priests, nuns and brothers is high, and the Church hierarchy remains close to 50% Irish.[8]

The local parish became an important part of Irish-American life. Andrew Greely, a Catholic priest and author of several fictional and non-fictional works dealing with Irish-Americans, writes:

> ...For many of us it is no exaggeration to say that the parish was the center of our lives; it provided us with education, recreation, entertainment, friendships and potential spouses. It was a place to belong. When people asked where we came from, we named the parish rather than the street or neighborhood.[9]

In 1872 the Irish Dominican preacher, Father Tom Burke said: "...Take an Irishman wherever he is found, all over the earth, and any casual observer will at once come to the conclusion, 'Oh; he is an Irishman, he is a Catholic!' The two go together."[10] Certainly that is true in the United States. To be an Irish-American means to be an Irish Catholic American. That identity was forged by the Irish Famine and its consequences.

In addition to its rigid Catholicism, a strong sense of Irish nationalism became part of the Irish-American identity. This, too, was a consequence of the Famine. After fleeing rural Ireland, Famine immigrants, traumatized by their experiences in Ireland, found grinding poverty and American nativism in the New World. Huddled together in urban slums, they were "disproportionately concentrated in the lowest-paid, least-skilled, and most dangerous and insecure employment; with few exceptions, they also displayed the highest rates of transience, residential density and segregation, inadequate housing and sanitation, commitments to prisons

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[7]McCaffrey, *Textures of Irish America,* p.61.
[8]Ibid., p.60
[9]Andrew M. Greely, *That Most Distressful Nation,* Chicago, 1972), p.87.
[10]Larkin, p.649.

and charity institutions, and excess mortality."[11] Irish-American nationalism was a response not only to conditions in Ireland but to the poverty and prejudices experienced in the United States. According to Lawrence McCaffrey, "Irish nationalism jelled and flourished in the ghettos of urban America as an identity search, a cry of vengeance, and a quest for respectability."[12]

The writings of Young Irelanders provided Irish immigrants with an explanation for their miseries in Ireland, their departure, and their hardships in the United States. Following an unsuccessful rising in 1848, many Young Irelanders such as John Mitchel eventually came to the United States. Mitchel's writings were especially influential . In his *Jail Journal* and *The Last Conquest of Ireland (Perhaps)*, Mitchel interpreted the Famine as a British conspiracy to exterminate the poor in Ireland. Mitchel explained: "The Almighty, indeed, sent the potato blight, but the English created the Famine."[13] Mitchel wrote that he was filled with a "sacred wrath" against England, and his writings soon convinced Famine emigrants that, in the words of historian Kirby Miller, "their sufferings were intentional, their emigration exile."[14] As Lawrence McCaffrey explains:

> Catholic and Gaelic traditions led the Irish in Ireland to accept the hunger, death and massive exodus of the 1840's with a large degree of fatalism. Passively, they considered their suffering a test of Divine punishment for transgressions. On the American side of the Atlantic, memories of the Famine crystallized and focused the Irish hatred of the British as the source of their miseries in Ireland and the cause of their exile in a strange and hostile land, where again they suffered from economic hardships and social and religious intolerance.[15]

Later generations of Irish-Americans, even those who became economically successful, continue to embrace the cause of Irish nationalism. McCaffrey believes that they connected the success of Irish nationalism to their own search for acceptability and respectability.

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[11]Miller, p.315.
[12]McCaffrey, *Irish Catholic Diaspora in America,* p.139.
[13]Miller, p.306.
[14]Ibid., p.307.
[15]McCaffrey, *Textures of Irish America,* pp. 134-135.

> They believed that as long as Ireland wore the British collar and leash, Anglo Americans would look down on them as a subject people. But when Ireland became a nation state, they would be liberated from the oppression of American nativism.[16]

Several generations of Irish-Americans supported freedom movements in Ireland with money and guns and pressured the government in favor of Irish causes and against the interests of Britain. Irish nationalism had become an important part of Irish-American identity.

Irish-American identity was also preserved through urban political machines. Although we associate these machines primarily with graft and corruption, we should remember that machine politicians provided many social services which had not been available to the Famine immigrants. They also provided Irish-Americans with jobs which guaranteed them the steady employment and decent wages which the Famine immigrants never knew.

In 1960, John Fitzgerald Kennedy, an Irish Catholic whose great-grandparents were all Famine emigrants, was elected President of the United States. For many Irish-Americans, Kennedy's election "symbolized their successful American journey."[17] In the following years, many Irish-Americans experienced great upward social and geographic mobility and became much more assimilated. In their movement from urban working-class neighborhoods into middle-class suburbs, they lost much of their ethnic identity. These Irish-Americans no longer live in ethnic neighborhoods, belong to ethnic parishes, or work with fellow ethics. As sociologist Norman Yetman has explained:

> The decline of precisely those factors that had initially separated them from the larger society was what contributed to the decline of Irish ethnicity. Today the Irish have become fully respectable and virtually indistinguishable from their non-ethnic American counterparts. [18]

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[16]McCaffrey, *Irish Catholic Diaspora in America,* p.140.
[17]Ibid., p. 183.
[18]Dennis Clark, *Hibernia America: The Irish and Regional Cultures,* Westport, CT., 1986, p. 192.

However, historian Lawrence McCaffrey notes: "Although active self-conscious ethnicity among Irish Catholics has diminished in quality, there are signs that it has persisted in quality." [19]Today we are seeing a great interest in Irish culture. Frank McCourt's memoir *Angela's Ashes* has been a best seller for over a year. Shows such as *Riverdance* and *Lord of the Dance* have become pop sensations. The popularity of Irish plays, Irish movies, and Irish music reflects the current appreciation in the United States for all aspects of Irish culture. This interest in Irish culture extends to education. Several colleges and universities throughout the United States offer Irish history and literature courses. Over 400 colleges and universities, not all of which are Catholic institutions, currently have Irish Studies programs.[20] Many public schools now have a curriculum for studying the Famine. As more and more students learn about the Irish Famine, they will discover the important role it played in shaping a unique Irish-American identity for millions of Irish immigrants and their descendants.

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[19]McCaffrey, *Irish Catholic Diaspora in America,* p. 197.
[20]*The Boston Irish Reporter,* Vol. 9, No.7, July, 1998, p.17.

# Costly Indifference:
# The Role of the Irish Middle Classes in Famine Relief

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Both nineteenth-century observers and modern historians have traditionally focused explanations for Famine suffering on policies of the British government and Irish landlords. Such analyses overlook the existence of a middle class in Ireland. Although diverse in its composition and uneven in its distribution over city and countryside, its members were frequently positioned to play a leadership role in relief efforts. Yet with some significant exceptions, they severely limited the resources and energy that they would devote to the disaster in their midst. Their choice illuminates fundamental aspects of 'bourgeois' ambitions, self-perceptions, and understandings (often rationalizations) of why people were starving.

In Ireland's largest cities, such as Dublin, Belfast, Cork, or Limerick, the middle class was relatively large and robust. For example, in Cork, over 600 people found work as tanners[1] and Dublin in the early nineteenth century had more than 650 barristers and nearly 1500 attorneys.[2] More typical were the provincial market towns, where by the time of the famine a considerable middle and small professional class of society had emerged, including innkeepers, publicans, apothecaries, policemen, farmers, graziers, carpenters, tailors, millers, butter buyers, grocers, and other shopkeepers. Distributions of these occupations varied according to local needs. By the early 1840s, for example, Thomastown in County Kilkenny, population 4,000, had only one or two large mercantile concerns, but a multitude of small shopkeepers, artisans, and laborers.[3] In the same period, the county of Roscommon claimed twelve resident lawyers, and over 100 land surveyors.[4] In more rural areas, a higher proportion of the middle class drew its income from land management, in functions such as gentleman farmer, land agent, "driver," or constable.[5]

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[1] John B. O'Brien, *The Catholic Middle Classes in Pre-Famine Cork*, O'Donnell Lecture at University College, Cork, 29 March 1979, 7.
[2] Maurice Craig, *Dublin 1660-1860* (London, 1952), 274.
[3] P.H. Gulliver and Marilyn Silverman, *Merchants and Shopkeepers: A Historical Anthopology of an Irish Market Town, 1200-1991* (Toronto, 1995), 163-164.
[4] Robert Scally, *The End of Hidden Ireland* (Oxford, 1995), 48-49.
[5] *Ibid.*, 49.

While the lack of data on approximate class divisions and income levels in most towns makes it difficult to see how capable the middle classes were of offering relief to the suffering, it is important to note that the relative scarcity of middle-income people in western Ireland posed particular challenges to aid efforts. Quakers who traveled in Connaught repeatedly noted the "want of educated residents to carry out the provisions of the [relief] act,"[6] and lamented that determining who really required relief, and distributing aid in any locality,

> ...is peculiarly the part of the intelligent and educated residents. Of these, by far the most valuable for such purposes are the middle classes of society; whose position brings them into connexion with both extremes, and whose habits of business qualify them for the conduct of public affairs. But, in many districts in Ireland, such a class had literally no existence...In almost every district, the few that were found capable of administering relief were so widely scattered, that their best efforts appeared trifling when compared with the mass of destitution around them.[7]

The same could not be said of larger market towns and cities in much of Ireland, where shopkeepers, for example, were clustered in numbers enabling them to organize to make a difference. Gullivan and Silverman note in their detailed study of Thomastown, for example, that

> by virtue of their occupational and economic role,...their prominent physical location in the town, and the informal function of some of their shops as social and informational centres, retailers were well known to their contemporaries and were often individuals of some sophistication. Thus, they were particularly well placed to have become influentially involved in public affairs...[8]

However, "quiescence and political accommodation" characterize the response of the shopkeepers to public matters, "whether local, regional, or national."[9] Their lack of leadership and scant concern is highlighted by the fact that during the Famine, the Thomastown relief committee was initiated, administered, and largely financed by local *'gentry' and 'notables.'* While a minority of those in business contributed any money at all, six of the larger retailers gave L1 each to a local total of L449, and no public subscriptions of any kind were recorded in the 1850s.[10] While contributions of L1 certainly seem meager given the scale of the crisis, judging an individual's financial means is tricky in the absence of individual data. Perhaps a few piecemeal statistics will serve as benchmarks for generosity: millers in the more generous town of Clonmel in Kilkenny

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[6] *Transactions of the Central Relief Committee of the Society of Friends During the Famine in Ireland in 1846 and 1847* (Dublin, 1852), 275.
[7] *Ibid.*, 101.
[8] Gulliver and Silverman, 302.
[9] *Ibid.*
[10] *Ibid.*, 304.

gave L100 or L50 each, shopkeepers donated up to L5 *though seldom more than 10 shillings*,[11] prosperous middle-class Quakers such as the Pim family contributed L600, and the Bewley family gave L700 (broken down into small sums so as not to embarrass the less well-to-do).[12] For a *salary*, Denis Mahon's land agent in Roscommon netted L500 a year,[13] while one of his "drivers" made just L10.[14] The income of a tutor at Trinity College, Dublin ranged from L410 to L1000 yearly, averaging about L650.[15] An average income for the times was probably about L75 a year.[16]

Finances aside, the historical record makes in clear that the middle classes (except perhaps in the most remote regions) were capable of organizing rapidly to achieve social goals. In Cork, for example, Protestants and Catholics rescued the Agricultural and Commercial Bank of Ireland when it veered toward insolvency, supported railways, promoted Irish manufactures, and voiced opposition to the building of a new Poor House.[17] Not all efforts were so self-interested; Dubliners, for instance, responded charitably to squalor and pauperization in their midst during the early nineteenth century by establishing many hospitals, poor houses, and charitable institutions.[18]

Some of the middle class efforts in the Famine years likewise showed compassion. Organizations to raise funds were created in Ireland, such as the General Central Committee for All Ireland, the Central Relief Committee for the Society of Friends (based in Dublin), the Irish Relief Association, and the Belfast Ladies' Relief Association. Their boards blended middle and upper-class membership. In total, these organizations may have raised as much as L312,000, with the Quaker contribution comprising more than 2/3 of that sum.[19] However, relief efforts were hampered by the fact that contributions tended to decline and many societies ran out of money in

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[11] Alexander Somerville, *Letters from Ireland during the Famine of 1847*, edited by K.D.M. Snell (Dublin, 1994), 57.
[12] Helen E. Hatton, *The Largest Amount of Good: Quaker Relief in Ireland 1654-1921* (Montreal, 1993), 89.
[13] Scally, 50.
[14] *Ibid.*, 69.
[15] R.B. McDowell and D.A. Webb, *Trinity College Dublin 1592-1952: An Academic History* (Cambridge, 1982), 179.
[16] Hatton, 11.
[17] O'Brien, 10.
[18] Fergus D'Arcy, "An Age of Distress and Reform: 1800-1860," in Art Cosgrove (ed.), *Dublin Through the Ages* (Dublin, 1988), 101.
[19] Christine Kinealy, "Potatoes, Providence, and Philanthrophy: the Role of Private Charity During the Irish Famine" in Patrick O'Sullivan (ed.), *The Meaning of the Famine* (London, 1997), 152 and Mary E. Daly, *The Famine in Ireland* (Dundalk, 1986), 91.

1847 and 1848, and the Belfast and Dublin societies, which tapped into the wealthiest population base, tended to distribute funds mostly locally. Nonetheless, it is important to remember that the *generally* miserly response of the 'bourgeoisie' to the Famine does not always apply at the *individual* level. The politician William O'Neill Daunt, to take one example, attended relief committee meetings regularly, and borrowed money from the government to employ the starving in opening a new line of road, the repayment of which burdened him for many years.[20]

Less generous forms of activism characterized the middle-class response to the Famine emergency throughout Ireland. Conservative and order-loving, the middle classes in town and country closed ranks to protect their property, a shibboleth then as now. Working on the assumption that a well-organized trade in foodstuffs existed in Ireland, even though this really only applied to the towns, the government in London touted political economy and the necessity of not creating competition for merchants. The merchants happily concurred with the official point of view, and many seized the opportunities presented by the Famine to gain landholdings and to benefit financially from their grain sales. Liam O'Flaherty's novel *Famine*, rooted in the author's eyewitness experience of hunger on the Aran Islands, presents the extreme view of Famine-era profiteering through its portrayal of the local gombeen-man, John Hynes:

> Like a vulture, that soars in ecstasy over a battlefield, he took delight in the people's misery, since that misery was going to put money into his pocket. All the money the people got from the relief works would cross the counters of his shop. His hotel would be crowded with officials.
> 'God bless this famine!' thought Hynes.[21]

While this fictional view exaggerates the malevolent intent of the merchant, factual reports lend support to the notion of speculation and greed. For example, a Quaker correspondent wrote from Belmullet, County Mayo, where just 800 people were employed on the public works at 8 d per day, that the merchants, "all of them *united, related and combined*," charged 2 s 6 d for fourteen pounds of Indian meal and 3 s for flour spoiled by damp.[22]

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[20] *A Life Spent for Ireland: Selections from the Journals of W.J. O'Neill Daunt Edited by his Daughter*, introduction by David Thornley (Shannon, 1972), 53.
[21] Liam O'Flaherty, *Famine* (London, 1937), 178.
[22] Hatton, 90.

Other methods of preserving property were also used. To avoid shouldering the burden of the poor rates, many middle-class people such as 'strong' farmers and tradesmen fled Ireland.[23] Others voiced political resistance to poor-rate hikes or to Rate-in-Aid, filling bookstores with pamphlets of complaint such as the one by barrister Robert Holmes which the English radical Alexander Somerville encountered on his travels in 1847. Somerville promptly characterized the author as "playing the fiddle while Rome burned," and his ideas as lacking in "one single practical suggestion."[24] Incensed at the government for the stinginess of its relief in Skibbereen, the *Cork Examiner* absolved the monied Irish of all responsibility, asking, "What can private benevolence, what can private charity do to meet this dreadful case?--Nothing...Government aid alone can be effective here."[25] Meanwhile, *Dublin University Magazine*, typically representing the Ascendancy viewpoint, raged that the gentry were bearing the brunt of the financial burden, due to the "adherence of our rulers to particular economic rules, now generally admitted to have been pushed to unjustifiable lengths, for the advantage of ship-owning and mercantile interests..."[26] Those "favored" no doubt felt that they had contributed more than their due through the poor rates.

Middle class people's most aggressive means of communicating that property rights came before human rights was their resort to force to defend what they owned. In Cork, starving mobs attacking bread shops were dispersed by police charging with fixed bayonets, and special constables guarded the city entrances to turn Famine victims away.[27] The same story was repeated in much of Ireland. Commercial travellers carried pistols, spring daggers and cartridges if military escorts were unavailable.[28] Adopting a garrison mentality, local land agents, squires, and graziers exaggerated reports of danger, besieging the overworked police with requests for protection and controlling deterrents. Sometimes cavalry, infantry, and marines arrived to support the local constables.[29] While most murder victims in the Famine years were actually laborers, cottiers, and petty farmers, and most crime was hunger-induced robbery, violent incidents got much press and

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[23] Graham Davis, "The Historiography of the Irish Famine," in Patrick O'Sullivan (ed.), *The Meaning of the Irish Famine* (London, 1997), 26 and 30.
[24] Somerville, 25.
[25] Davis, 35.
[26] "The Economic Case of Ireland Stated," *The Dublin University Magazine*, March 1848, 409.
[27] Davis, 28-29.
[28] Somerville, 40.
[29] W.J. Lowe, "Policing Famine Ireland," *Eire-Ireland* (29:4, 1994), 50.

spooked the local men of property. One strong farmer, Owen Cox, claimed to have spent L300 building a permanent police barracks on his property on the Strokestown estate.[30]

Violent episodes provided the prosperous with a pretext for decreasing aid; the ingratitude of the masses could be cited. As the Famine stretched across years, proving itself to be in a different league from usual disasters, generosity dried up in both England and Ireland, a phenomenon known as "donor fatigue." This sentiment was fed by the filth, vermin, sickness, and cheap-labor potential that the dying dragged with them into the larger cities. While Irish newspapers did not follow the example of some British papers in showing the Irish as irrational, animalistic, and obscene, a feeling of moral distancing between middle and lower classes had set in even before the Famine.[31] As standards of material life and civility rose even in rural Ireland, the propertied began to treat poverty as a moral stigma, to view the poor as an undifferentiated mass, to replace a paternalistic ethic and tolerance of habitual debt with a formal, commercial value system.[32] They justified the failure of the old land system as essential to modernization. Anger and alienation resulted. In cities such as Dublin, those with money could isolate themselves from the destitution through a sort of social apartheid; already in the pre-Famine years, the middle classes had joined the gentry in fleeing the city and transforming suburban Dublin into a "little Italy," with "meditteranean-style villas," accessed by the new railways.[33] Catholic farmers in rural areas had to exert more of an effort to distance themselves from the pauper masses who were never far away. While some stayed mute, perhaps out of sympathy for a group with whom they felt a lingering kinship, most ingratiated themselves with the Ascendancy to protect their social aspirations, loudly disapproving of any disrespectful behavior or threat to order.[34]

Perhaps the best evidence of indifference to Famine suffering comes from looking at what *did* preoccupy middle-class minds during the years 1845 to 1852. As an American and outsider, William S. Balch experienced culture shock when he came to Ireland for an investigative tour in the fourth year of the Famine. He noted immediately that the shops in Limerick were "numerous,

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[30] Scally, 55 and 113. The Crown eventually assumed the expense of building the barracks.
[31] Davis, 36.
[32] Scally, 35 and 38.
[33] D'Arcy, 97.
[34] Scally, 55.

large, handsome and well furnished, betokening an extensive and profitable business," but found Irish destitution haunting, different in degree than American poverty.[35] He disapproved of the building of a Catholic cathedral at Killarney, condemning "an arrogant priesthood" for taxing "a poor, ignorant, degraded, half-starved population" to erect "a stately edifice" of beauty and grandeur.[36] Social and commercial life in Dublin proceeded without significant setbacks, and indeed a railway entrepreneur felt suitably energized to fund a major Exhibition of Industry on the heels of the Famine in 1853. Building continued; the four main railway terminals in Dublin were completed between 1840 and 1850, one of them an expensive Renaissance palazzo. In academia, grants for endowed fellowships were cut and the student population of Trinity College, Dublin, slipped by about 200 from 1845 to 1852, but otherwise the school's major response to contemporary events was to send for arms and soldiers to be quartered in the College in anticipation of revolutionary disturbances in 1848 (apparently the Famine posed less of a threat).[37] In evaluating the level of scientific interest in the disaster, Sean O'Donnell commented on the

> remarkably ineffectual or, indeed, uncaring, role played by Ireland's scientific establishment during the Famine tragedy...[The great mathematician William] Hamilton continued to work on hugely theoretical questions without the slightest thought of organizing Famine relief. [Father Nicholas] Callan was spending his money on esoteric chemicals [for battery designs] when it might well have been purchasing lives 150 miles away. [Robert] Kane was science advisor to the government but still did nothing on the several committees where he served.[38]

In fact, after Kane was knighted for determining (incorrectly) that dampness caused the potato blight, his "uniform non-attendance at [Health Board] meetings"[39] summarized his commitment.

Lethargy among the academic, mercantile, and farming communities--a desensitization to what was happening "below" as they focused on climbing higher in their individual endeavors--stands unquestionably as the most typical middle-class response to the Famine. Perhaps the dearth of evidence of responsible activism on the part of this class is the most damning testimony possible. But exceptions do exist, and it is worthwhile to understand how thoroughly a few sacrificed to ease the plight of the desperate. Quakers, through their investigations, fundraising,

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[35] Christopher J. Woods, "American Travellers in Ireland Before and During the Great Famine: A Case of Culture-Shock," in Wolfgang Zach and Heinz Kosok (eds.), *Literary Interrelations: Ireland, England, and the World* (vol. 3, Tubingen, 1987), 83.
[36] *Ibid.*, 82.
[37] McDowell and Webb, 199-200.
[38] Sean O'Donnell, "The Inventive Famine Decade," *Eire-Ireland* (20:3, 1985), 143.
[39] *Ibid.*, 144.

soup kitchens, long-term improvements, and lobbying of the government to heed the voice of conscience, are remembered as heroic in Ireland even today. The personal costs were sometimes enormous: Jonathan Pim collapsed from exhaustion, and Joseph Bewley died of it. More than a dozen Quaker workers died from famine epidemics, probably through exposure in the line of duty.[40] Many doctors, nurses, magistrates, relief committee officials, and clergy--both Catholic and Protestant--contracted fever or typhus and died while working with the stricken. Munster in 1847 alone lost forty-eight doctors to Famine-contracted illnesses.[41] Sheriffs, military officers, and police forces, seeing the worst of the Famine's ravages, often dreaded doing evictions or tried to have them delayed. In 1847, 224 policemen died, and the stress and moral compromises caused a record 526 police to resign the same year.[42] Though it is not known how liberally he contributed, the retired brewery owner Arthur Guinness II witnessed the impoverishment of Connemara with horror. He wrote to his son, "I wish to know any mode in which we might be able to aid in the work [of relieving the wretched poor]. You know my dear Ben that my purse is open to the call."[43]

Regrettably, much of the Irish public was more callous, focused in a banal way on the advantages the Famine might bring them, giving cautiously or not all, shunning activism and protests which might offend the "higher-ups," readily ignoring starvation or assigning responsibility elsewhere. Surely much criticism of famine relief efforts should rest with the British government and Anglo or Irish landlords, but this is not the end of the story. As Mary Daly has written,

> The response of the Irish public...was highly ambiguous. Despite the subsequent capitalising on the event by nationalist writers...the experience seems to have paralysed most influential Irishmen at the time.... [T]here is no strong identifiable call from Ireland for any particular measure to meet the famine. Even the call to prevent food exports was much stronger in retrospect than it was at the time....Unwillingness of the more prosperous parts of Ireland to shoulder even a small proportion of the burden of the poorer unions suggests that self-interest was not a British monopoly.[44]

Perhaps one productive message of the Famine is that social problems--even the most glaring and ubiquitous ones--are easy to ignore and tempting to rationalize away, but indifference by the prosperous toward the poor may have frightfully harsh and ultimately incriminating consequences.

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[40] Christine Kinealy, *A Death-Dealing Famine: The Great Hunger in Ireland* (London, 1997), 110.
[41] "Medical History of the Famine," in R. Dudley Edwards and T. Desmond Williams (eds.), *The Great Famine: Studies in Irish History,* (1956), 281.
[42] Lowe, 66-67.
[43] Patrick Lynch and John Vaizey, *Guinness's Brewery in the Irish Economy 1759-1876* (Cambridge, 1960), 167.
[44] Daly, 115.

# IDEAS MATTER

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British Prime Minister Tony Blair's recent apology to the Irish people for Britain's role in the Great Irish Famine (1845-1852) reflects the victim-worshipping ideology of late twentieth century Anglo-American culture where emotions are superior to intellect as a guide to life. One famine expert defines ideology "as the framework of ideas – the worldview – that molds how individuals and groups perceive the problems that face them."[1] This paper will present the narrow-minded application of another ideology – political economy – and how its implementation contributed to a catastrophic famine in nineteenth century Ireland.

The Great Irish Famine occurred during a sea change, an axial moment in history. The Industrial Revolution was an expression of machine muscle that began in eighteenth century Britain. Like an untamed steamroller grinding across the landscape industrialization ran roughshod over local individuality, replacing it with one-size-fits-all conformity. The inevitable globalization of local economies and cultures had divisive and painful consequences for traditional societies such as Gaelic Ireland. The ramifications of the Industrial Revolution and its concomitant ideological shifts away from mercantilism gave birth to political economy, and, one can argue, the Great Irish Famine.

The so-called philosophical father of political economy was Adam Smith who wrote in his Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations (1776) of "the mean rapacity, the monopolizing spirit of the merchants and manufacturers" and he added, "that they neither are,

[1] *The Great Irish Famine*, edited by Cathal Poirteir (New York, 1995), p. 87.

nor ought to be, the rulers of mankind."[2] All this was, unfortunately, eschewed in favor of various vested interests and the facile point which many of Smith's minions drew from his study: Let the market alone or governmental non-interference. Smith's nuanced explication of the "invisible hand" of capitalism was thus reduced to a theoretical justification for untrammeled exploitation, ruthless profiteering, and empire building.

Adam Smith's intellectual progeny included Thomas Malthus, Edmund Burke, and what came to be called the Manchester School. Their doctrine was dubbed laissez-faire and it would become the unchallenged mode of political discourse in nineteenth century Britain. It held that there is a world of rational economic relationships autonomous and separate from government or politics. It is the world of the free market, and is regulated within itself by certain "natural laws," such as "supply and demand" and "marginal utility." All individuals should follow their own enlightened self-interest; each knows his own interest better than anyone else; and the sum total of personal interests will add up to the general liberty of all. In this pre-Keynesian world, it was believed that government intervention would paralyze all private initiative by upsetting the natural balance of supply and demand.

One of the most significant disciples of Adam Smith and laissez-faire was Thomas Malthus. He predicted that if population were allowed to grow at a geometric rate it would outstrip an arithmetically growing food supply. Thus, in his "Essay on Population" (1798) he outlined the role of famine as the ultimate positive check on unfettered procreation:

> Famine seems to be the last, the most dreadful resource of nature. The power of population is so superior to the power of the earth to produce subsistence for man, that premature death must in some shape or other visit the human race. The vices of mankind are active and able ministers of depopulation. They are the precursors in the army of destruction; and often finish the dreadful work themselves. But should they fail in this war of extermination, sickly seasons, epidemics, pestilence, and plague, advance in terrific array, and sweep off their thousands and tens of thousands. Should success be still incomplete,

[2] Robert Heilbroner, *The Worldly Philosophers* (New York, 1953), p. 60.

> gigantic inevitable famine stalks in the rear, and with one mighty blow levels the population with the food of the world.[3]

In the spirit of economic orthodoxy, he also urged that poor relief "exacerbated the problem of population growth by encouraging the poor to breed recklessly."[4] Thus "British legislation for Ireland was based on Malthusian economic theory: Ireland's poverty was due primarily to overpopulation, a reflection of Catholic 'improvidence' . . . Logically, if population was the problem, then massive emigration was at least part of the solution."[5] Thus, according to Peter Gray, this Malthusian worldview produced "a climate of opinion that prioritized economic development over the relief of suffering, even in conditions of social catastrophe."[6] Incredibly, Malthus brazenly expressed his eliminationist sentiments regarding the Irish to fellow political economist David Ricardo in the most-often quoted Malthusian passage "that a great part of the population should be swept away from the land."[7]

Of course, this deliberate cruelty in the name of political economy required an intellectual justification, an imprimatur. Hence, political economists perpetually claimed "for their science a paramount importance to the interests of mankind and urging its conclusions on governments and legislatures, as the only infallible guide for securing the welfare of the state."[8] This callous disregard for individual lives shows the hegemonic power of ideas to view people as sometimes only as a means to a preferred end (apologies to Immanuel Kant). Therefore, William Gregory's pernicious 1847 quarter-acre clause -- which denied public assistance either in the workhouse or outside it to tenants holding more than a quarter of an acre of land -- was an estate-clearing device to restructure Irish agriculture from small scale farming to large scale, capital-intensive

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[3] Thomas Malthus, *Essay on the Principle of Population* (Pelican edn, Harmondsworth, 1970), pp.118-19.
[4] Christine Kinealy, *The Great Calamity* (Dublin, Ireland, 1994), p. 11.
[5] Kirby Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles* (New York, 1985), p. 245.
[6] *The Great Irish Famine*, p. 89.
[7] Kinelay, *The Great Calamity*, p.16.
[8] Ibid, p. 289.

agribusiness. Unfortunately, the social engineering mandated by political economy, as codified in the quarter-acre clause, decimated many of Ireland's small tenant farmers. Once again the underclass invariably became cannon fodder. Meanwhile, political potentates dogmatically believed that permanent advantages would accrue to Ireland from the imposition of scarcity. "Ireland's famine was the punishment of her imprudent and idleness," concluded the Anglo-Irish writer Anthony Trollope in 1862, "but it has given her prosperity and progress."[9]

Of course, when all else fails, there's God, and the political economists felt no compunction in citing the deity to buttress their policies. Richard Whately, the Anglican Archbishop of Dublin and the messianic agent in the evangelical spread of political economy in Ireland, "saw political economy as second in importance only to religion and as having in large measure assumed the position vacated by religion as the great agent of social control."[10] Even Charles Trevelyan, Permanent Secretary at the Treasury and zealous advocate of fiscal austerity during the Famine, would conjure up images of the Divine to assuage his conscience. "God, he believed, had ordained the Famine to teach the Irish people a lesson, and the machinations of man should not seek to reduce the effects of such a lesson. Again this philosophy had much in common with the earlier writings of Adam Smith and Edmund Burke."[11] Thus government ministers perceived political economy as a discipline possessing scientific impartiality sanctioned by both economic orthodoxy and Christian morality.

The other great engine of social control – education – was also restructured to reflect the new ideology and to inculcate the Irish with a reverence for private property and a respect for the sacredness of contracts. The Irish National School System, founded in 1831, made a strenuous effort "to reeducate the peasantry so doggedly on the precepts of classical political economy in

[9] Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles*, p. 381.
[10] Thomas Boylan and Timothy Foley, *Political Economy and Colonial Ireland* (London, 1992), p. 2.

Ireland."[12] Thus political economy became the Mammon set forth by the Church of Ireland and the government-controlled National Schools. Even the Fourth Estate provided little solace to the impoverished Irish peasantry: "There are times when something like harshness is the greatest humanity."[13]

This resolute belief in political economy would result in the parsimonious expenditure of relief funds during the Famine and the infamous injunction that Irish property must pay for Irish poverty. Moreover, the authority of Edmund Burke, an acolyte of Adam Smith, urged the government's non-intervention during a time of crisis:

> It is not by the breaking the laws of commerce, which are the laws of God, that we are to place our hope of softening the divine displeasure to remove any calamity under which we suffer. [14]

Thus, even though Ireland experienced an agonizing and tragic integration into a maturing global economy, political leaders relied on the seemingly irrefutable logic of Adam Smith, Thomas Malthus, Edmund Burke, and the Manchester School to justify impoverishing and demoralizing Ireland. After all, Britain had become the world's richest nation based on its belief in political economy, and its imperial leaders felt they could successfully impose their apparently successful ideology upon their Irish neighbor. Ironically, according to Gerald O'Tuathaigh, "Ireland's proximity to Britain, then the first industrial nation in the world, was a crucial factor in her economic problems."[15]

The Great Irish Famine does not provide simplistic answers to difficult questions for those who seek the security of prejudices, but it does provide a case study in how beliefs ultimately lead to behavior and how an accounting of beliefs may lead to an understanding of actions. If all

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[11] Kinealy, *The Great Calamity*, p. 249.
[12] Robert James Scally, *The End of Hidden Ireland* (New York, 1995), p. 154.
[13] Kinealy, *The Great Calamity*, p. 209.
[14] Edmund Burke, *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity* (London, 1795).

famines are indeed political events, a deeper appreciation of the role of ideology in political decision making is the key to successful education regarding the phenomenon of famine. Cormac O'Grada's magisterial work, Ireland Before and After the Famine, makes this point most succinctly:

> The final irony is that when ideologues played fast and loose with people's lives they did so not out of genocidal intent -- far from it – but from a commitment to their vision of a better world. Even the unlovely Senior's (Nassau Senior, political economist) eagerness to sacrifice hundreds of thousands of Irish lives was the greater good of both survivors and 'all that makes England worth living.'[16]

Finally, the limitations of political economy circumscribed both British ministers and British public opinion in formulating Irish relief policy. Their rigid adherence to a belief system obviated the creation of innovative and effective relief policies and made the slide from distress to mass starvation inevitable. Thus, it can be asserted that the Great Irish Famine was a man-made disaster of an ideological nature.

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[15] Gearoid O'Tuathaigh, *Ireland Before the Famine 1798-1848* (Dublin, Ireland, 1972), p. 121.
[16] Cormac O'Grada, *Ireland Before and After the Famine* (Manchester, U.K., 1988), p. 128.

# Liam O'Flaherty's Famine as an Aid in Teaching World Hunger

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Genocide or natural disaster? By the end of the first week of teaching the Great Irish Famine, teachers may be confronted with this simplistic argument, dividing the class along the black and white solutions that high school students sometimes eagerly seek. How could there be any doubt that a million people died, that a million emigrants were sent out without the whole world being aware, without some mastermind coordinating efforts and then hiding facts? Parallels to the Viet Nam War are obvious. "The whole world's watching!" on one side and former Secretary of Defense Robert MacNamara, who was brilliant and had the United States' total information resources available, took twenty five years to understand the Viet Nam War.

Liam O'Flaherty's 1932 novel FAMINE is an excellent source for students trying to deal with the issue of how the famine could have happened or could have been allowed to happen in a civilized country. A novel by its inherent blend of plot, setting, and characters has the advantage over historical accounts in presenting the slow unfolding of events in one small area. O'Flaherty traces one family in "the Black Valley" through the direst days of the potato blight's arrival and the subsequent attempts by the family to survive. The novel succeeds in showing the famine by accretion, slowly over time and the steps taken by various constituents in the village.

First, the characters. In history, people too often become "the peasants," "the landlords," "the Estate agents," "the peelers," "the Catholics," "the Protestants," or "the clergy." Statistics produce groups, but novelists build characters, which by definition have to be differentiated and individualized. So one million starving people get names and personalities and range in age from a seventy-year-old to a nursing infant. O'Flaherty involves in his novel representatives of the spectrum of inhabitants of Ireland in 1847: The good Aristocratic landowner who earnestly wants to help his tenants but ineffectually can only give a speech on his mansion steps; Chadwick, a drunken, perverted ex-soldier who is the estate manager for an "absentee landlord" and combines ineptness with outright cruelty to exacerbate the suffering; a Catholic curate who wants the masses to resist violently and a temporizing priest who argues obedience and patience;

a well-intentioned Protestant minister whose efforts at relief bring boas and discarded capes from the English upper class but no food; Hynes, a Catholic merchant who buys corn in anticipation of price rises and profit; young Hynes, a doctor who denounces his father and is torn in his loyalties; the elderly Kilmartins who remember the rising of 1798 and now face the famine as powerless elderly; Thomsy, a loyal family member with a stereotypical weakness for drink; and the main characters Mary and Robert who are torn between family, rebellion, and escape. Also in FAMINE are numerous village characters, all interacting to remind the reader that people live in social structures, especially in Black Valley, but in most of famine Ireland where 80% of the people lived in rural conditions, not in organized, politically-defined urban areas.

FAMINE's setting is useful in picturing the conditions of Ireland in the 1840's. Black Valley is bounded by mountains on each side, with one lane/road going through the valley. The mud huts of the tenants abut on this lane and thus every time the agent or the "peelers" come to collect rent or seize animals or look for wanted men, the entire valley is alerted and likely to come to their walls as the procession passes. The peasants use the mountains to hide themselves from the law and the estate managers or to run sheep or cattle to avoid seizure for rents owed. O'Flaherty's setting reminds us that travel was by foot or at best carriage but that that was not regular and that the roads were muddy or rocky or in states of poor repair. Travel and communication difficulties only exacerbated the flow of information and then the dispersal of government policy and response. Government was in London, about seventy miles from Dublin; then Dublin to the West area, County Mayo, would be another sixty miles. Without telegraph, without large population centers, with only the mechanism of the recent Poor Laws, the isolation of Black Valley and its residents becomes more understandable to students who are perhaps used to overnight response to floods or fires as a governor or the President declares a national disaster and helicopters and trucks of the National Guard are shown the next day dropping supplies and aiding victims.

Setting in FAMINE is useful in showing how the victims suddenly came to realize that they were in trouble. Not by the evening news or the morning paper, but by what has happened in the next valley. Communication and insight into the disaster was virtually lacking. "Why didn't they leave?" your students will ask. And O'Flaherty makes it clear that there was always hope for the next harvest, for the potatoes buried in the ground on fern leaves, for public works jobs, for rent being forgiven, for relief food from beneficent groups. One historian's description of relief as a million pounds is turned in the novel to O'Flaherty's description of the peasants

crouching in despair, trying to look humble and needy so that the horseback donors will give them a loaf of bread. "Insufficient humility" at first cost Mary her loaf of bread: "If my baby is fat...little thanks are due to the powers, that took our stock and refused us work on the roads. It's not charity we're asking for, sir, but justice." (FAMINE, p. 356). Then the intercession of one of the donors delivers a day's food, "a small brown loaf," to her.

Two areas of O'Flaherty's setting are unforgettable. After an old woman died in the night, she was buried coffinless in a fissure in the rocky yard: "It was now getting dark and there was a solitary bird twittering in the distance. Mary took the corpse by the head. The old man took the feet. They had to bend it in order to get it down into the crevice. They laid the stones carefully over it, after Mary had covered the dead face with a shawl." (FAMINE, p. 432).

Poignant, too, is the scene outside the Workhouse gates. Two women are waiting, hopeful that someone inside has died during the night, creating a vacancy. They huddle in the cold of the ditch as wagonloads of food are heading for the port to be exported on the next ship. "The workhouse wall sloped outward to its base along which ran a grassy ditch. The grass looked brown in the fading gloom of the approaching dawn. Dark bodies were strewn along the ditch. They looked like corpses owing to their uncouth postures and their stillness. Now and again, one of them moaned. Then a murmur passed along the recumbent figures, who shifted, formed groups, tossed angrily, fell apart, and became still once more." (FAMINE, p. 436). A novelist can give this juxtaposition of a workhouse, huddled poor outside, food by the wagonload going overseas, for the maximum effect. In fact, some may find the most damning evidence of callous British indifference that food was being exported from Ireland in the first two years of the famine. Students will recognize that O'Flaherty's picture is similar to Dickens' of the French peasants in TALE OF TWO CITIES, Pasternak's in DR. ZHIVAGO, or of our modern homeless on the streets just steps from people enjoying warmth and gourmet food.

By focussing with O'Flaherty on this one area of a few hundred people, students can perhaps mentally draw the outlines of the society and its relative isolation and self-containment that were important ingredients in the famine's impact. It may be useful to have students draw or chart the setting of Black Valley since O'Flaherty was clear in his descriptions and his vivid portrayal will put faces and places to the suffering.

Finally, the plot element of FAMINE may make the novel the best way to tell the story of the unfolding blight and subsequent famine. Plot is a series of events unfolding over a period of time. The controlling device is the passage of time; O'Flaherty tells his story over approximately

six months. The passage of time brings the hopes of birth and harvest and coming relief and the despairs of failure and disappointment and hunger and death.

Readers will appreciate O'Flaherty's sense of time on the day the blight comes to Black Valley: "Other people came and stared at the cloud. There was a peculiar silence in the Valley. The air was heavy as a drug...not a breath of wind...birds did not sing. Then...the cloud began to move lazily down upon the Valley.... spread out on either side, lost its form and polluted the atmosphere, which became full of whitish vapor, through which the sun's rays glistened so that it seemed that a fine rain of tiny whitish particles of dust was gently falling from the sky. Gradually a sulphurous stench...like the smell of foul water in a sewer...terror seized the people and a loud wailing broke from the cabins as the cloud overspread the whole Valley, shutting out the sun completely."(FAMINE, p.300).

Especially poignant, too, is the characters' waking up to hunger and facing the day in search for food: "'Instead of complaining there by the fire,' she said in the same angry tone, 'ye will have to forage now. We depend on the earth around us....gather what ye can...nettles and dandelions...berries and sloes on the bushes. Old man, let you go down and fish in the river.'" (FAMINE, p. 349). Mary worries not only about herself but also about milk for her nursing son. Then, too, the character Thomsy has to stop and think before he leaves to get a message to the next valley: How much food must he have in order to make the journey? These characters living on the verge of starvation know the time limits for eating and action.

As the novel nears its climax, every hour and every day become enemies with food being counted to the portion, then to the bite. Time is marked by the seizure of the family cow, the eating of the last rotten potato, the sharing of the last piece of bread. A novel proceeds by this passage of time and the plot unfolds day by day. Student readers can see what the residents were thinking as days passed: Wait—the agents are going to forgive half the rent; wait—this year's harvest is coming in; wait—the potatoes we have stored in the ground are still good; wait—public works are coming to give everyone jobs; wait—the Quaker relief party is coming to this neighborhood; wait—Hynes will give us corn on credit. The novel makes it entirely explainable that the peasants were waiting for something "the next day." Their vision is short, limited to the next day or the next deadline for their hopes. Therefore, the passage of time, which moves the plot along, is very helpful for students to learn about the progress of the famine.

O'Flaherty's weakness is in some of his characters, such as Chadwick and Hynes, which tend to be stereotypical and caricatures. Then, too, the sense of time is telescoped as he goes

from chapter to chapter and has events piling on top of each other, as when one character suffers from typhus and rapidly declines. However, O'Flaherty's telescoping keeps the novel fast-paced and high interest for high school students. The construction of the Kilmartin family as a unit with constant tension and interplay as the older parents begin to yield to the younger generation is carefully planned. By the end of the novel, all readers will be interested in the fates of the family members.

Is O'Flaherty accurate in his picture of the famine years? With the proviso that he is showing extremes and types in the limited number of people he shows, yes. He does not spend much effort showing the variety of landlords or methods used to bring relief. There were, however, numerous evictions, seizures, and actions against debtors. The public works program was limited and was often involved in useless tasks such as the breaking of stones or constructing roads to nowhere. O'Flaherty does not show any of the debate in government about policy. This novel is about the effects of policy as felt in the hinterlands and thus needn't portray government debate. A teacher should certainly attempt to reconstruct British policy and philosophy; FAMINE shows the effects and results.

Liam O'Flaherty was born in Western Ireland in 1896, about fifty years after the famine of 1845-52. He has, however, captured the landscape and the people of Black Valley and woven them into a believable, entertaining novel of the famine years that makes this horrible disaster vivid for readers. High school students will be able to argue the question of genocide or natural disaster more thoughtfully with the examples of the Kilmartin family and the people of Crom, Black Valley, Western Ireland.

O'Flaherty, Liam. The Famine. Boston: Godine, 1992. Pp. 448.

# Women and the Irish Famine

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The history of women and the Irish famine is still largely waiting to be written. And it may never fully be written because the victims of the famine, the poorest of the poor in Irish society, were silenced not only *during* the famine but *by* it: the famine brought about the eradication of an entire social class - decimating the landless laborers and cottiers. And within that story of the famine victims exists still another layer of invisibility - the woman's experience , which is often (as with most historical events) assumed to be indistinguishable from the man's experience.

In most studies of the famine the names we encounter are usually those with varying degrees of political power or influence - the Players, as it were: Charles Trevelyan, Lord John Russell, Sir Robert Peele, Daniel O'Connell, Thomas Malthus, John Mitchel and the occasional woman ( Queen Victoria, for example.). The closest we get to knowing the victims is through eyewitness accounts from this period, through such narratives as Alexander Somerville's *Letters From Ireland during the Famine of 1847* and Asenath Nicholson's *Annals of the Famine in Ireland, in 1847, 1848, and 1849* (1851) and *Lights and Shades of Ireland* (1850). Both Somerville and Nicholson (from Scotland and the United States respectively), traveled through Ireland during the famine period documenting the horror they encountered. They clearly sympathized with the famine victims they witnessed, and both sought to analyze the *causation* of the famine as well as the effects. Nicholson railed against the belief that the famine was God's doing: "God is slandered, where it is called an unavoidable dispensation of His wise providence,

to which we should all humbly bow, as a chastisement which could not be avoided."[1] She likewise puts forth the argument that sufficient food existed during the famine and that it could have been met without the loss of life:

> *and never was a famine on earth, in any part, when there was not an abundance in **some** part, to make up all the deficiency;...Yes, unhesitatingly may it be said, that there was not a week during that famine, but there was sufficient food for the wants of that week, and **more** than sufficient.*[2]

Through his use of verbatim oral evidence Somerville wanted the poor to speak for themselves.[3] Narratives such as these bring us closest to the victims, and yet these first-hand accounts are often neglected by historians:

> *These descriptive and individualized narratives by contemporary observers...constitute a significant buy frequently neglected historical source. The omission or scant reference to these writings in Famine historiography suggests a fear, on the part of some historians, of their emotive potential along with a suspicion that they do not constitute a sufficiently objective source.*[4]

In most studies of the famine the victims remain nameless and unknown although a famine "poster child" emerged in the person of **Bridget O'Donnell**, who was depicted by the *Illustrated London News* in a haunting illustrated sketch of she and her two children, labeled the "Famine Beggars." And sometimes famine victims are named when their deaths received mention in local newspaper coverage as Mary Commings' did in Galway:

> *With regret we have to add another name to the melancholy catalogue of the dead from starvation in this district, in the person of an aged poor woman named Mary Commins, who, while on her way on Wednesday last to seek for admission in the workhouse, expired on the side of the road near Dangan, within about a mile of the town. When she was discovered, life was found*

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[1]Asenath Nicholson, *Lights and Shades of Ireland* (London, 1850), p. 237

[2]Ibid., p. 239

[3]K.D.M. Snell, "Introduction" in Alexander Somerville's *Letters from Ireland during the Famine of 1847* (Irish Academic Press, )

[4]Margaret Kelleher, "The Female Gaze," *Fearful Realities* (Dublin, Irish Academic Press, 1996), p.119

*extinct, and her remains were taken to the workhouse, where an inquest was subsequently held upon the body, by Michael Perrin, Esq., deputy coroner, and a verdict returned of "**died from want** and the inclemency of the weather."* [5] (emphasis added)

Women's history is a fairly new development in the Irish professional history establishment, emerging in the late 1970s and 1980s with the recognition of gender as a category of analysis; it was formally recognized by the International Committee of Historical Sciences in 1987.[6] Historians have been uncovering a rich history of Irish women's political activism, but most of women's organized political work take place *after* the famine; indeed conscious feminist activism in Ireland is seen as emerging in the late 1800s with the Ladies Land League (1881).[7] In post-famine Ireland, women would become engaged in the causes of nationalism, the struggle to vote, the labor movement, and in forming and joining such organizations as Inghinidhe na hEireann, the Irish Women's Franchise League, the Irish Women's Suffrage and Local Government Association, Cumann na mBan, Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, and the Women's Social and Political Union.[8]

Most of the active women's involvement with the famine - among those not its victims - came from middle and upper class women who engaged in philanthropic work, a type of "maternalist feminism"[9] that emerged from women's involvement in social work and charity. The Industrial Revolution had solidified both the class structure and gender roles of Irish society:

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[5]"Died From Want", *Galway Vindicator,* 23 January 1847.

[6]Margaret MacCurtain, "Late in the field: Catholic sisters in twentieth-century Ireland and the new religious history," *Journal of Women's History* (Winter, 1995), 49.

[7]Lucy McDiarmid, "A Breaker of Windows," *Irish Literary Supplement* (Spring, 1998), p. 29

[8]Ibid.

[9]Ibid.

men were involved in the public sphere, with the upper class engaged in the professions and politics, and women's sphere was the personal arena, the private sphere of the home. These distinct spheres were evident among the upper and middle class women who were not expected to earn an income, whereas poor women continued to work as they always had.....both in the field along with the men and in various domestic industries (wool, cotton, linen) to earn supplemental income for the family. So for middle and upperclass women, charitable work was socially acceptable and encouraged in them from childhood and was seen as an extension of women's natural role as nurturers, caregivers, and healers. "Philanthropy was one of the few activities that gave women access to the public sphere without threatening its male domination."[10] During the famine women set up soup kitchens, developed cottage industries, distributed clothing, nursed famine victims, and operated relief societies. The diaries of wives of landowners show some provided soup and clothing to tenants. The Belfast Ladies' Relief Association established knitting and weaving workshops and provided employment and education to poor girls and women. And later during the famine a large part of relief was performed by women on an individual basis rather than through a charitable organization because relief committees had often broken down:

> *The individual and localized nature of these relief-schemes helps to explain the scarcity of information regarding their scale and efficacy. Although historical studies show that women and children were 'the primary recipients of a charity which came increasingly to be provided by other women' - 'the delicate touch of the peeress assisting the rough fingers of the peasant,' in Susanna Meredith's flowery terms - even fewer details survive as to the recipients of relief.*[11].

Although women's charitable activities and contributions to Irish famine relief were quite significant, "philanthropy has been dismissed by many historians as the leisure pursuits of idle

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[10]Margaret Preston, "Women and Philanthropy in Nineteenth -century Dublin," *Historian; a Journal of History* (Summer, 1996), p. 764

[11]Margaret Kelleher, *The Feminization of Famine* (Durham, Duke Univesity Press, 1997)

women and of little lasting consequence."[12]

The Irish Famine shaped migration patterns. While the Irish had been migrating from their country in large numbers before the famine, and continued to do so well after the famine, it stimulated its numbers and prompted a female exodus from Ireland. No other immigrant group in the United States during this time had as large a percentage of female immigrants as did Ireland - around 53%. [13] Ireland of the latter half of the 19th century held out very little for its young people, especially its women. Emigration to America offered a hopeful alternative to almost certain poverty and low social status in Ireland.

Migration patterns from Ireland to the U.S. moved along kinship lines and, to a lesser extent, along friendship lines. Much of it occurred along female lines - sisters bringing over sisters, aunts bringing over nieces, cousins bringing over cousins, etc. While women brought over men as well - especially brothers - the pattern was mostly to "journey" other women over. Those already in America helped finance other family members to make the crossing and the new arrivals would often live with or near the already established family member.[14]

The economic motivation to emigrate was paramount for Irish women, and their continued pattern of late marriage or no marriage indicates that the importance of economic considerations continued in America. Irish women moved to American cities for jobs, not for husbands. A wide range of opportunities for unskilled, unmarried women were available in America in the mid and late 1800s due to an expanding urban economy. The majority of single Irish women opted for

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[12]Ibid., p. 93

[13]For studies on Irish women's immigration to the U.S. see Hasia R. Diner, *Erin's Daughters In America* (Baltimore, 1983) and Janet A. Nolan, *Ourselves Alone* (Kentucky, 1989).

[14]Hasia R. Diner, *Erin's Daughters in America* (Baltimore, 1983)

domestic service, while others of them worked in the needle trades, factories, and mills. As domestics they had a better standard of living than the other workers - better food and housing because they "lived in " with their employers. They flocked to this field because demand was high (most other white women avoided domestic work because they found it demeaning and it required that they stay unmarried) and it paid better than the other available work. Irish women workers experienced a fairly rapid rate of economic mobility: while about 54% of Irish women immigrants chose domestic service, second generation Irish females were likely to move into while collar and semi-professional positions. They became teachers, nurses, typists, stenographers and bookkeepers. School teaching became for the second generation of Irish women what domestic service was to the first[15].

**The 'Feminization of Famine'**

In the *Feminization of Famine,* Margaret Kelleher maintains that famine and its effects are represented universally and traditionally through images of women.

> *The prevalence of figures of mother-and-child is obvious from even the most cursory look at today's media representations of disaster and catastrophe, or relief agencies' fund-raising campaigns. Depictions of the dry-breasted mother unable to feed her child, of a woman unable to bury her child, of a mother torn between the competing claims of her children, or of a child suckling the breast of its dead mother occur not only throughout present-day accounts but also embody the worst consequences of famine in literary and historical texts.*[16]

What emerges from her study "is a much more complex picture of women and famine than traditional images of passive victimization, on the one hand, or generalized comments on

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[15]Ibid.

[16]Margaret Kelleher, *The Feminization of Famine* (Durham, 1997), p. 2

women's biological resilience, on the other."[17] Kelleher concludes with a postscript about contemporary images of famine, noting that little has been changed since the 19th century: the horrors are still inexpressible, the media still uses the image of a ravaged female figure to depict famine, and famine still stalks the earth (as we see today in the Sudan and North Korea) She is critical of the contemporary media's methods for depicting famine, and argues that the prevalent media images of emaciation and suffering, helplessness and hopelessness suggest "the victims' powerlessness and inability to help themselves."[18]

> *Rarely are the strategies employed by people in order to withstand famine given attention; like many of the images of the 1840s famine made available at the time, the famine victim is on the point of death, or has just died,* ***never receives a voice and usually remains unnamed.***[19]
> (emphasis added)

This depiction of famine, Kelleher concludes, has political consequences, promoting among the famine spectators a fatalism regarding what is seen - that famine is somehow inevitable. "The resulting implication, that famine is a natural rather than a political or economic event, is itself a political message, regrettable but also convenient."[20]

In her study of U.S. television coverage of famine in Africa, Jo Ellen Fair analyzes media depiction of the famines in Ethiopia (1984-1985) and Somalia (1991-1992). She critiques the media for portraying images of women to symbolize the famine crisis but not focusing on the lives of the women, or on their strategies of survival. She also argues that popular journalism understands and uses the term *famine* to mean a natural disaster causing mass starvation, and thus famine is situated in terms of individuals not having enough to eat. As a result, short-term

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[17]Ibid., p. 11
[18]Ibid., p. 227
[19]Ibid.
[20]Ibid., p. 229

remedies to get food to the starving is emphasized. The definition of famine as "sustained hunger associated with drought, food shortages, imbalanced food distribution, and war" which "underscores a structural problem of there not being enough food for consumption" gets little attention.[21] The underlying political and economic causes of famine are neglected when news stories "medicalize the victims of famine":

> *Though stories describe starvation as caused by hunger, they treat the hunger afflicting Ethiopian and Somali women not as a political, economic, and social problem but as a sickness, a condition that merely happens but does not require blame of any body politic or social system at either a national or international level. As Nancy Scheper-Hughes points out, 'A hungry body exists as a potent critique of the society in which it exists. A sick body implicates no one.'*[22]

Famines are political events. Floods, droughts, and crop failures cause food shortages. Civil wars, governmental policies, land usage, poverty, and political corruption turn natural disasters into famine. Experts on world hunger say there is enough food to feed the people of the world and that modern famines could be prevented. When the Bridget O'Donnells of the world speak in their own voices and dine at the same table with those who administer the relief, perhaps we will see the end of dying "from want."

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[21]Jo Ellen Fair, "The Body Politic, the bodies of women, and the politics of famine in U.S. television coverage of famine in the Horn of Africa," *Journalism & Mass Communication Monographs* (August, 1997), p. 11

[22]Ibid, p. 17

# John Mitchel, Famine Propaganda, and the Rise of Irish Nationalism

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"The Almighty, indeed, sent the potato blight, but the English created the Famine."[1] John Mitchel would spend the entire second half of his life trying to spread this propaganda to anyone who would listen. He is certainly not the first political activist in world history to attempt to use propaganda to sway public opinion. But Mitchel's aggressive and polemic writing style sets him apart from other 19th century Irish nationalists. Simply put, John Mitchel was a great hater, and the target that he chose to vent that rage upon was the British government. The weapons that he chose were ink and paper to communicate his vituperative views. Though he did not see much success in Ireland during his lifetime, his controversial views, especially the ones dealing with the level of British culpability in the Great Famine, would come to have an enormous impact on future generations of Irish nationalistic leaders. Mitchel connected the Great Hunger of 1845-1852 to the need for an Ireland free of its Union with Great Britain. This critical connection would later influence such Irish leaders as James Stephens of the Fenians during the 1860's, Charles Stewart Parnell and the Home Rulers of the 1880's, and Arthur Griffith and Patrick Pearse of Sinn Fein during the early part of the early 20th century.

John Mitchel, the son of a Presbyterian minister from Ulster, went on to become a graduate of Trinity College in Dublin. Disliking his chosen career as a barrister, he cut his political teeth by occasionally submitting articles for *The Nation*, the newspaper for the Young Ireland movement. At the time, this group was still aligned with Daniel O'Connell's Association for the Repeal of the 1800 Act of Union between Great Britain and Ireland. Two events in 1845 would

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[1]Mary E. Daly, "Review article: Historians and the Famine: a beleaguered species?" *Irish Historical Studies*, XXX, ( Nov. 1997), 596.

prove to have lasting implications for John Mitchel and the future of Ireland. Thomas Davis, one of the Young Ireland leaders at *The Nation*, would suddenly die. His passing would immediately place John Mitchel in a more dominant role at *The Nation*, alongside Charles Gavan Duffy. The second event that would rock Ireland and Mitchel's conscience would be the beginning of the devastation caused by the potato blight in 1845.

Just before his death in 1847, Daniel O'Connell, the Irish Catholic leader who also wanted to rid Ireland of the Union, revealed his own anti-British slant in a letter to the Repeal Association. He stated that, "It will not be until after deaths of hundreds of thousands, that the regret will arise (i.e. within the British parliament) that more was not done to save a sinking nation. How different would the scene be if we had our Parliament- taking care of our people- of our own resources. But alas! alas! it is scarcely permitted to think of these, the only sure preventatives of misery, and the only sure instruments of Irish prosperity."[2]

O'Connell seemed to be quite clear in placing the responsibility for the Famine squarely onto the shoulders of the British government and their Act of Union. But even this did not go far enough for the radical Mitchel. He wanted more of an effort by O'Connell in making the connection of self-rule and the results of the Famine known to the lower classes of Irish poor.

Mitchel's radical views, including the thorny topic of the use of violence, led him to break with *The Nation* and the Young Ireland movement, and to start his own newspaper called the *United Irishman*. The title was intended to be a throwback to Theobald Wolf Tone's non-sectarian uprising against the British in 1798. Mitchel's incendiary words in this new publication led directly to the passage of new legislation by the Westminster Parliament called the Treason-Felony Act. Revolution was in the air in Europe in 1848, and with this situation coupled with the Famine, made the British government fear for violence in Ireland. In a little over a month's time, John Mitchel was charged with Treason-Felony, convicted by a packed jury, and transported out

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[2]*The Nation* (February 20, 1847), 31.

of Ireland for a sentence of fourteen years. Mitchel, in his usual aggressive style claimed that "on this day, about four o'clock in the afternoon, I, John Mitchel, was kidnapped, and carried off from Dublin, in chains, as a convicted 'Felon'."[3] While incarcerated, Mitchel wrote his highly-charged and autobiographical *Jail Journal.* Arthur Griffith, who would later be influenced by Mitchel's writings, as well as become a founder of the United Irishmen and Sinn Fein movements at the turn of the 20th century, claimed that *Jail Journal* "has no peer outside Swift. In the literature of the prison it has no equal."[4]

Mitchel's hatred of the British was a crucial part of his Famine propaganda that would later push many of his countrymen to become Irish nationalists. Mitchel admitted that his hatred for the British system even outweighed his own love of Ireland saying "Now, in looking back, and trying to analyze my own feelings, or principles, or whatever it was that made me act and write as I did in Ireland, I have found that there was perhaps less of love in it than of hate- less of filial affection to my country than of scornful impatience at the thought that I had the misfortune, I and my children, to be born in a country which suffered itself to be oppressed and humiliated by another; less devotion to truth and justice than raging wrath against cant and insolence. And hatred being the thing I chiefly cherished and cultivated, the thing which I specially hated was the *British system.*"[5]

The Famine was the central issue in Mitchel's anti-British system propaganda. Simply put, Mitchel believed " that the terrible famine of the 1840's, like the lesser famines which preceded it , was manipulated by the British government ministers for the joined purposes of clearing off a surplus population and maintaining unimpaired Ireland's usefulness as a granary."[6]

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[3]John Mitchel, *Jail Journal* (Dublin, 1982), p. 1.

[4]Ibid., p. viii.

[5]Ibid.

[6]Ibid., p. *xvi.*

Mitchel outlined his charges of British culpability for the Famine in his 1861 work entitled *The Last Conquest of Ireland(Perhaps)*. Meticulous historians would later charge that his work was not backed up by the necessary documentation. Some scholars would charge that Mitchel only imagined the situation. Mitchel would make a good study for a psychohistorian, trying to figure out what led him to his questionable theories.

Mitchel's hypothesis in *The Last Conquest* is a central feature in the raging debate going on at the end of the twentieth century that is taking place over the historiography of the Famine. Two schools of thought have squared off over this controversial topic. The nationalistic group, that primarily blames the British, owes a debt to the Mitchel propaganda. The second school of thought, which some would call the revisionist group, looks more to socioeconomic issues in determining the causes of the Famine.

Though the title of Mitchel's book on the Famine appears to concede that the British had succeeded in crushing Ireland, a second look reveals a different conclusion. The final words of his book claim, "So long as this hatred and horror shall last- so long as our island refuses to become, like Scotland, a contented province of her enemy, Ireland is not finally subdued. The passionate aspiration for Irish nationhood will outlive the British Empire."[7]

Mitchel even accused the British government of putting on insincere public acts of caring for Famine victims, in order to try to impress the world stating "Moreover, this savage programme of deliberate extermination was given a particular ugliness by England's genius for hypocritical protestations of benevolence, so that the very instruments and policies of starvation and murder were presented to the world and to English consciences as generous efforts to deal with a calamity visited by Providence upon an improvident and luckless people."[8]

Like the true propagandist that he was, Mitchel emphasized and distorted certain arguments to

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[7]John Mitchel, *The Last Conquest of Ireland(Perhaps)* (Dublin, 1861), p. 325.

[8]John Mitchel, *Jail Journal* (Dublin, 1982), p. xvi.

drive his point home, while leaving out opposing arguments that could lend some balance to *his* polemic views. A century later, Adolph Hitler will prove that the concept of the "Big Lie" will work to a certain degree. To suggest that England was responsible for creating an artificial famine to sweep away millions of Irish souls is dangerous runaway rhetoric. Although the blight certainly had natural causes, to make the argument that the Famine was deliberately prolonged by ministers in the British government would be tough to prove.

John Mitchel leaves out important counter-arguments to the anti-British view. One is that the middle and upper classes in Ireland itself could have done more to help the Irish poor who were starving. Another argument to point out is that central governments in the 19th century did not intervene in people's daily lives in any great degree. Adam Smith's laissez-faire policy was pretty much accepted as gospel. It is also possible that while some British ministers and bureaucrats may have had good intentions, they just plain did not know what they were doing. This was simply just the way things were done at that time in all of Europe. Irish novelist Thomas Flanagan wrote, "England administered famine relief with a confused and often sullen generosity, yet certainly in a better spirit than would the tsar have addressed a famine in Poland, or the sultan one in Armenia."[9]

John Mitchel did not want to hear any of these counter-arguments. He saw the devastation of his homeland and he identified the enemy as the English from across the Irish Sea. This type of demagoguery which searches out simple and easy answers can be extremely dangerous when placed before a receptive audience. With his poisoned pen, Mitchel exploited that audience, and the repercussions would ring down through the 20th century.

In some ways Mitchel's style of writing, which reflected his personality, was almost as important as the content of his works. Mitchel's biographer, William Dillon, referred to the "deep and fierce anger which burned in the heart of every true Irishman at the unutterable

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[9]Ibid., p. xvii.

degradation and shame to which his country and race has been subjected."[10] One influence on Mitchel's aggressive style is Thomas Carlyle, a Scottish historian and social critic, whose most famous work was entitled *French Revolution*. In this work, Carlyle revealed his highly dramatic and polemic style. He used compelling language in commenting on the social upheavals caused by the emergence of modern industrial society. Carlyle, like Mitchel, also took an increasingly gloomy view of the failure of English society. William Butler Yeats claimed that John Mitchel was "the only Young Ireland politician who had music and personality, though rancorous, and devil-possessed."[11] Thomas Flanagan claimed that Mitchel's "personality was indeed devil-possessed, haunted by hatreds and obsessions which run through his sentences like stiff, inflexible wires."[12]

John Mitchel was an angry young man who reached back into Irish history for heroes, but would also go on to influence future Irish nationalists. Mitchel liked to point back to Jonathan Swift, the Anglo-Irish political satirist. Though best known for *Gulliver's Travels*, Swift wrote a powerful tract on the plight of the Irish in 1729, entitled *A Modest Proposal.* This ironic work proposed that the cure for Ireland's overpopulation and lack of exports was the sale of babies as delicacies for gentlemen's dinner tables. Cannibalism became Swift's symbol for British inhumanity. Needless to say, Mitchel jumped after this theme. To Mitchel, it proved that the British government had designs on Ireland long before the Famine of 1845. Robert Mahoney claimed, "Demonstrating the longevity of those designs, and that, however natural the potato blight, the fact of the Famine was a direct result of British domination, was Mitchel's ultimate purpose in invoking Swift's complaints dating from 1728."[13] Mitchel went on to claim that "the

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[10]William Dillon, *Life of John Mitchel* (London, 1888), p. xiv.

[11]John Mitchel, *Jail Journal* (Dublin, 1982), p. viii.

[12]Ibid.

[13]Robert Mahoney, "Historicising the Famine: John Mitchel and the Prophetic Voice of Swift" *History Ireland,* 19, p. 133.

warnings, advice and remonstrances, which were addressed to our ancestors one hundred and twenty years ago, suit our condition exactly today."[14]

Central to Mitchel's charge of British culpability for the Famine was the subject of ships loaded with grain leaving Ireland at the height of the distress. Mitchel was influenced on this subject by John Fintan Lalor and his call for land reform. Mitchel stated, "I do believe the landed proprietors, if they would, even now, or any considerable number of them, take to heart that proposal (i.e. Lalor's proposal that the native population must be fed *first* from home produce) could make fair and honourable terms for themselves, and become the most popular and powerful aristocracy on earth."[15]

Mitchel believed that the British were behind the land-lord system which was responsible for the exploitation of the Irish poor. Barry Sloan claimed, "The flashpoint for Mitchel's passionate anger came with the great famine which he witnessed at first hand and about which he later said that it ' might have driven a wise man mad.' The inertia of the Irish landlords in this crisis persuaded him that Lalor's radicalism was the only hope for the peasantry, and he became convinced that the British government was cynically exploiting 'the horrors of peaceful and constitutional famine' to destroy any Irish opposition."[16]

Mitchel's analysis of the Famine, flawed as it may have been, would come to influence Irish nationalists for the rest of the nineteenth century, and even into the twentieth. After escaping from Van Dieman's Island, Mitchel made his way to America where he would play a major role in spreading anti-British propaganda to Irish-Americans until his death in 1875. After the Famine and the collapse of the Young Ireland Confederation, Fenianism burst onto the scene in Ireland and America. Many of the ideas of the Fenians can be traced back to Mitchel, but he

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[14]Ibid.

[15]Barry Sloan, "The Autobiographies of John Mitchel and Charles Gavan Duffy: A Study in Contrasts", *Eire-Ireland,* 22, (1987), 29.

[16]Ibid., 34.

remained above the fray, as he was opposed to secret societies. Arthur Griffith referred to Mitchel's influence on the Fenians when he wrote, "The spirit of Fenianism- which was indeed his own- and its object, had his support but he declined to assume its leadership. He doubted the efficacy of secret conspiracy to serve Ireland, and he had no illusion as to the relative strength of England and Ireland whilst England was at peace with the Great Powers."[17] Mitchel did play a sort of a 'Ben Franklin' role in Paris to coordinate the raising of money for the Fenians.

Mitchel's writings also influenced Charles Stewart Parnell, the most important figure in Irish politics during the second half of the nineteenth century. Arthur Griffith claimed, "Mitchel's policy, interpreted and applied in a stronger generation by the man whose career Mitchel's writings molded- Charles Stewart Parnell- brought the stoutest bulwark of English power in Ireland to the ground. When Parnell bade the farmers of Ireland 'Keep a firm grip on their holdings,' he crystallised into a phrase the policy Mitchel urged unsuccessfully in 1848."[18] John Mitchel may have been unsuccessful in his own lifetime, but his ideas on the Famine and its connection to Irish Nationalism went on to influence many future Irish leaders.

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[17]John Mitchel, *Jail Journal* (Dublin, 1921), p. x.

[18]Ibid.

# Personalizing History
# Genealogy & the Irish Famine

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There are approximately 40 million people in America today that claim to be of Irish heritage. There are bit more than 5 million people living in Ireland today. Most commonly agreed-upon figures for the devastation of the Great Irish Famine state that at least 1 million people died from the effects of the Famine, and another 1.5 - 2 million emigrated forever. All of those statistics are historical and impersonal. By learning and utilizing the tools of genealogy, a researcher may be able to overcome those detached, and soulless numbers, and actually put a face on history.

Conducting a genealogical search is really a three level process. Level 1 is the interview stage, direct contact with relatives and acquaintances of relatives. Level 2 is consulting written records via inter-net or by mail. Level 3 involves on site research where information is available. Be forewarned that there may well arise disparities of information.[1] Sorting out those possible conflicts may be some of the most exciting and insightful moments in the research.

Always start the process of collecting family information by going from the known to the unknown. The simplest place to start is with yourself. Who are you? Write a small biography of yourself, as if you had interviewed yourself. Where and when you born? Note significant dates, relationships and events in your life. Pay particular attention to those things that make you unique. These may be physical characteristics such as height, weight, complexion, red hair, left handedness or short legs. These could be personality traits. These may also be talents you possess.Can you play a musical instrument, draw, or dance? Describe your education and work life. Note in as much detail as possible where you have lived and when you lived there. Begin constructing two charts; the first will be a chart of direct ancestors[2] , often called a pedigree chart[3] . The second chart, called a family group chart, will be a much extensive because it will include all the relatives you discover.

The next obvious step is to interview your parents. Ask lots of questions and take notes on

[1] Christine Rose, CG,CGL,FASG and Kay Germain Ingalls,CGRS, *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Genealogy*, (New York: Alpha Books, 1997), p.9 [I was surprised when this book was recommended to me at the New England Historic Genealogical Society]

[2] Tony McCarthy, *The Irish Roots Guide*, (Dublin, Ireland: The Lilliput Press, 1997), p.74 [McCarthy offers an unusual, circular, direct ancestor chart]

[3] Rose and Ingalls, p.44

everything. In addition to the previous questions, you should begin to question your parents about their siblings, parents and grandparents . Questions like what was Grandpa's full name? What was Grandma's maiden name? What were the names of their relatives? Did they own land? What church did they attend? Did she have a hobby? Did he serve in one of the wars? If they have died, where are the buried? What did Grandma look like? Do you have any pictures of them? Basic questions like these will lead to more questions which will all help develop a more complete portrait of each relative. It will also give you some sense of the family traditions and tales.[4]

The next interviews are with the other relatives. Start with the oldest first[5] . Living grandparents are treasure troves of information. They are the ones most likely to know facts such as their own grandmother's maiden name or place of birth. Again, ask lots of questions and write down everything. A couple of cautions regarding interviewing older relatives. One question may trigger a long forgotten memory. Give them ample time to respond. Social mores have changed over the generations so be sensitive to what seems like reluctance to particular questions. Do not "push" the issue for you don't want to cause your relative to become silent[6] , but it's probably wise to note their reticence in your notes. Interview as many of your relatives as possible, including cousins and in-laws. If it seems significant, look to interview neighbors and co-workers of relatives that have information of value.The most fundamental information on each relative you're seeking is names, dates of birth, places of birth or baptism, marriage, and death/burial records. Beyond these basics , your goal is to determine what sort of person this was, so questions about occupation, personality characteristics and looks are also important.

As you are conducting your initial interviews, it is crucial to also begin collecting level 2 and level 3 documentation. Write for copies of available certificates, deeds and records. Begin to transcribe, photocopy, or computer scan all relevant family mementos and records[7] . Letters, diaries, journals, scrapbooks, baby books, photographs, cards, and financial records are all important sources of information. If there is an old family Bible, examine it carefully for often these were the only written records of births, marriages and deaths. If there exists the proverbial old trunk in the family attic, take your note pad, or better still, a micro-cassette recorder, with you.

[4] Patricia Keeney Geyh, "Organizing Your Research." *The Irish at Home and Abroad*, Volume 2, #2, (1994/1995) p.45

[5] Patricia Keeney Geyh, "Collecting Family Information." *The Irish at Home and Abroad,* Volume 2, #1 (1994/1995) p.13

[6] Ibid. p.13

[7] Rose and Ingalls, p.18-20

As you begin to accumulate information, you need to continue filling in your ancestral chart and your family group charts[8] . Don't worry that there are a number of different styles of these charts. Find the one that makes the most sense to you. It is imperative that you document each fact you write into the charts with a source citation. A citation is "the authority or source from which information is taken, added for the support of the facts. In genealogy, every fact needs at least one citation[9] ." This will help you to trace your work back and will also assist you in settling conflicts in information. Regarding conflict in information; one important, and somewhat unfortunate, point to keep in mind is that people often lie outright, or conceal truths. When people purposefully misinform you during your family history research, it is usually for a reason consequential to them. It may be something like a divorce may bring on feelings of failure, a child born out of wedlock evokes shame, or the jail term of a relative embarrassment. Expect to run into conflicts of information. It is a part of the process of genealogical research. Resolving these conflicts is one of the fascinating aspects of developing a family history.

Up until not too many years ago, the task of transferring all of the accumulated knowledge was hand done. Now numerous, relatively inexpensive, computer programs have been written to handle the task. The comparative number crunching involved in data base management is one of the the things computers do best. Type in the name of a relative and a well-written program will handle the task of relating it other information in the data base. The same process applies to other relevant data. Two programs that are widely recommended are Brøderbund Software's *Family Tree Maker*, and Palladium Interactive's *Ultimate Family Tree*. Each are written for both the Macintosh and Windows platforms and are capable of generating a variety of appropriate forms and reports. Each may also be used to add graphics capability to your family history[10] .

You will run into situations where documents can't be usefully photocopied. All genealogists must learn to transcribe a document. Transcripts are exact word-for-word copies of the text of a document. Nothing is changed, not spelling, nor punctuation, nor even obvious errors[11] . Where corrections to, or explanations of, a document are made is in the abstract of the document. The rule is to use square brackets [] around explanations or corrections. A genealogical abstract is a summary of the essentials of a document. Write an abstract for every document you

[8] Rose and Ingalls, p.43
[9] Ibid, p.27
[10] Matthew L.Helm and April Leigh Helm, *Genealogy Online for Dummies*, (Foster City, California: IDG Books, 1998) p.D-38 and p.D-41
[11] Rose and Ingalls, p.313

examine. One further technique to begin using in your notes and reports is formatting dates in day, month (spelled out), and four digit year format (eg. 26 July 1998). The U.S. Military and most European nations use similar formats already and if uniformly implemented, it will save you from unneeded confusion.

When it comes to level two searching in the Untied States, the indispensable book is Elizabeth Petty Bentley's *The Genealogist's Address Book.*[12] The current edition is 650+ pages of addresses, phone numbers, and significant contact person at archives, historical and genealogical societies, libraries, lineage & heritage societies, surname registries, immigration research centers, publishers, booksellers, professional bodies and adoption registries. It also contains listings for thousands of genealogical periodicals and newsletters. Two other useful books recommended by Rose & Ingalls, as well as by the New England Historic Genealogical Society, are Val Greenwood's *The Researcher's Guide to American Genealogy, 2nd revision* and Loretto Dennis Szus and Sandra Hargreaves Leubking's *The Source, A Guidebook of American Genealogy.*

Finding relatives is a process of constantly networking from the known to the unknown. Hometown newspapers, phone books and City Directories are all useful tools. City Directories can be especially valuable in that they list residents alphabetically and then cross reference by street address[13] . That way you may be able to approach former neighbors of missing relatives. One underutilized tool is the telephone service. Most libraries carry old phone books, which may be good research tools. On the Internet there are currently search engines that are capable of doing a national phone listing search. All of these tools work much better if you are searching for someone with a fairly distinctive name.

The whole challenge of names is worthy of many books in and of itself. One of the problems stems from the not always acknowledged fact that names change over time. Spellings change; people often had their names "Anglicized" or "Americanized" either by choice, by accident or against their will. Never assume that the surname you are researching has stayed the same through the generations[14] . Be especially aware of the prefix or suffix patterns of any particular ethnic group you are dealing with. The Irish Ò, O`, Mc, Mac and Fitz prefixes are examples of how names may evolve over generations. Keep in mind that some family members may also add

[12] Elizabeth Petty Bentley's *The Genealogist's Address Book*, (Baltimore, Maryland: Genealogical Publishing Company, Inc., 1995)
[13] Rose and Ingalls, p.94-95
[14] Ibid, p.65-74

dropped prefixes back to their names. It is far more common today for a married woman to keep her maiden name, and occasionally the offspring may carry the mother's maiden name as well. Two last thoughts on names. It is far less confusing to trace a surname that is fairly distinct, such as Foggarty, than it is to trace one that is ubiquitous, like Murphy. It can also be very difficult to trace surnames that are rare, like Dufficy. In either case the alternative is to research back through the mother's maiden name.

Three resources available from the United States government are Census records, the Social Security Administration Death Index, and military service records. Each is available from the National Archives, or its branch offices. The Social Security Death Index is now available free on the internet[15] . The decennial census has evolved in scope over the decades. For example, since 1900 the census lists the month and year of birth in addition to age. Immigrants year of entry and the number of years resident in the U.S. are now listed. To utilize census date you need to familiarize yourself with the Soundex code for surnames[16] . Fortunately almost all books on genealogy explain it fully.

As a tool for researching genealogy the internet is a mixed blessing. On one hand a researcher can access enormous amounts of great records on line, post queries to appropriate places, take genealogy classes, and be very productive. One the other hand the internet is overflowing with undocumented information, sloppy research, and even deliberate misinformation. As people become more sophisticated about using the "net" it will improve. The internet is not a library; there is no librarian on duty to make choices about the quality of new publishing. Always realize the internet is the ultimate democracy of publishing, people can publish almost anything. When using purely internet sources researchers must use their best critical thinking skills to sort through the huge amounts of data.

Level three searches, where you go to the site of the records, require more preparation. Even if you are searching repositories in your own town, you still must determine which vital records are kept by which organization. City Hall, Health Department, Court House, County Clerk, Tax Assessor and School District offices are all potential places to discover the information you seek. To avoid a lot of wasted energy, it is crucial to familiarize yourself with the infrastructure of record keeping at your search site. This becomes even more important as you

[15] Helm and Helm, p.277
[16] Rose and Ingalls, p.102-111

travel to distant sites, especially to Ireland.

The one reliable short cut around long distance travel is to utilize the resources of the Family History Library created by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (Mormons). Due to their religious belief in salvation for the dead by representational baptism they have become expert at genealogy. Their microfilm library is currently around 2,000,000 researched rolls. Contrast that to the New England Historic Genealogical Society's 10,000 role library[17] . They maintain 2,500 Family Home Centers nationwide. Their collections are not limited to just American records either. The records are available for use at one of these branches by anyone, not just members of that faith. All one needs to do is go to one of the centers and request a particular set of records and a copy will be sent to that center[18] . The catch is that you need to know exactly what you are looking for in order to request the necessary microfilm.

Any 19th century Irish woman or man who immigrated to the U.S. between 1846 and 1860 had either suffered through or was the child of someone who had suffered through the Great Hunger.This makes them a unique population. As Kinealy says about those that left in 1847 "...emigration had increasingly become the last refuge of a desperate population who believed that their only hope for survival lay outside of Ireland[19] ."This desperate population was a reflection of the groups most devastated by the Famine. They were predominately from the bottom socioeconomic class of 19th century Ireland. They were mostly cottier tenant farmers or landless laborers, overwhelmingly Roman Catholic, and mostly illiterate[20] . Life was so bad for this group that their average life expectancy had fallen below that of black slaves in America[21] . From the standpoint of doing genealogical research, this presents some distinctive problems. They didn't write many letters, they owned little land and they simply didn't figure in a number or records. The members of this class are difficult to trace back very far historically. The best illustration of this is:

> "President John F. Kennedy was probably the most distinguished man to have descended from Irish Catholic tenant farmer stock. On St. Patrick's Day 1961 the Irish Ambassador to Washington presented President Kennedy a grant of a Coat of Arms and a genealogical chart showing the President's immediate decent and the background of the Kennedy's in Ireland. The documents were prepared by the Chief Herald at the Genealogical Office, Dublin....The earliest direct ancestor that could be traced was the President's great-

[17] Gerald Anderson, Lecture at New England Historic Genealogical Society, 20 July 1998
[18] Rose and Ingalls, p.82
[19] Christine Kinealy, *This Great Calamity*, (Dublin, Ireland: Gill & Macmillan Ltd. 1994) p.299
[20] Gearòid Ò Tuathaigh, *Ireland before the Famine 1798-1848* (Dublin, Ireland: Gill & Macmillan Ltd. 1990) p.106
[21] Thomas Sowell, *Conquests and Cultures*, (New York: Basic Books, 1998) p.65

grandfather, Patrick Kennedy, who was born about 1823.[22] "

If the Chief Herald, with all his resources, can only trace back to an ancestor born in 1823, then the definitive genealogy of those of the tenant farmer class can be tough.

A further impediment to tracing ancestors in Ireland is the destruction of the Public Records Office in Dublin during the Irish Civil War in June of 1922. Two weeks after the British turned over the office it was seized by Irregular Forces and turned into a bomb factory. Provisional Government forces used borrowed British artillery pieces to shell the Four Courts complex... "In a matter of seconds, two heavy mines, which had exploded in the record treasury, destroyed seven centuries of work[23] ." While the now-titled National Archives has been able to reconstruct some of the lost material, there will always exist huge gaps.This is not to imply that the task is impossible, just daunting.

Key to any successful genealogical research in Ireland is to understand the various administrative districts that may contain relevant records. The 32 Counties, 331 Baronies, 2,508 civil parishes and 60,462 townlands that Ireland is divided into may present some confusion to researchers. Overlay this with the additional division into 163 poor law unions, 829 medical charities dispensary districts, and the numerous diocese and parishes of both the protestant Church of Ireland and the Roman Catholic Church as well as the separation of the island into the Republic of Ireland and the continued inclusion of six counties as part of Great Britain, and it appears an almost impossible task. However, if you know the name of the townland and the county, you can usually correlate that information with any of the other divisions. Fortunately, too, a series of County Heritage Centers are available to assist in genealogical searches in the Republic[24] .

McCarthy lists particular records that should be most useful such as census returns, though only 1901 & 1911 returns escaped the 1922 destruction. The records of birth, death and marriage which used to be divided by poor law unions are now kept under the Health Boards around the nation. Church parishes may also serve as good sources of information on marriages & baptisms. Land Commission reports keep track of the transfer of ownership of land. This is wonderful source of information on people who actually owned land, but useless for the tenantry. According to McCarthy, the richest source of information on 19th century Ireland is the 'Griffith's valuation'

[22] McCarthy, p.101
[23] Ibid, p.13-14 [McCarthy also notes that the *Constitution's* headline was remarkable for its spirit of non-partisanship: 'Regulars' Dashing Attack Irregulars' Fine Defence']
[24] Ibid, p.8-10

tax records.These are now in either the National Archives of the Irish Republic or the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland. Tithes were taxes on produce to support the established Church of Ireland. While siginficant these records are sketchy. Estate records, it they exist in readable condition, can be quite useful. Wills, land deeds and graveyard records may also be of benefit[25] .

Shipping records and immigration records are a veritable gold mine of information about the migration of the Irish tenant farmer class to America.. Records dealing with naturalization are also useful, although before the passage of the 19th Amendment they really only pertain to males.

Despite all the difficulties, as you do the genealogical research, and recording, what should happen is that your ancestors and relatives go from being *unknowns* to *faceless names* to *real people with real qualities*. Because there really is no final finished end product in genealogy it is important to keep in mind that the joy is in the journey itself.

[25] McCarthy, p.16-72