7. ‘This most humane commerce’:

Lace-making during the Famine

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No. 86 in Fintan O’Toole’s *History of Ireland in 100 Objects* is a lace collar from Youghal, which ‘epitomises one of the more remarkable achievements of Irish women in the second half of the nineteenth century – the creation from scratch of a world-class craft industry’ (**Figure 7.1**).[1] The collar’s aesthetic appeal is secondary to its significance as an artefact linked imaginatively, if not literally, to the Famine. It was exhibited at the Royal Dublin Society in 1906, but is a legacy of the foundation of lace-schools in Ireland during the 1840s and 1850s by nuns and middle-class women for the purpose of providing an income for girls whose families were directly affected by the Famine. The Presentation Convent in Youghal is frequently cited as the origin of the Famine lace industry. Mother Mary Ann Smith took a piece of old Italian lace, unravelled its threads one by one, and taught herself to make it, before teaching the girls at the convent school to do the same, and then opening a lace school in 1852.[2] In his 1886 history of Irish lace, Ben Lindsey hints at a reason why Youghal was an apposite location for the revival of lace-making as a relief measure during the Famine: as the former home of Sir Walter Raleigh, it was ‘the place where the first potato took root in Irish soil’.[3]

Lace-making in Ireland had a longer history, however. While lace had been made commercially in Limerick and at Carrickmacross since the 1820s, most attempts to introduce lace-making in Ireland were philanthropic rather than profit-driven. In 1743, Lady Arabella Denny had taught ‘the famishing children in the poor-house’ to make Bone lace, awarded prizes from the Dublin Society to the best lace-makers, and helped arrange for the exhibition and sale of their work.[4] Mother Mary Ann Smith’s experience was prefigured by a number of ladies in the 1820s. Mrs Grey Porter, wife of the rector of Dunnamoyne in Carrickmacross, taught her servant to make lace by copying some she had brought from Italy, and the example spread to the 'deserving poor' of the area. Lady De Vere in County Limerick taught the mistress of a local school to copy lace she had bought in Brussels, and Lady O'Brien of Dromoland taught satin stitch embroidery as a relief measure in 1822 – an experiment repeated by her daughter in 1846.[5] In John Banim's *The Anglo-Irish of the Nineteenth Century* (1828), Gerald Blount, the English-educated Ireland-hating Anglo-Irishman, is ambushed at a party in London by a group of philanthropic Irish ladies longing to read him reports about their successes in teaching needlework to poor Irish women. Miss De Vere tells him:

> when the institution at Clack-ma-cross was opened, ten women could not be found capable of doing the kind of work required; and in the course of seven months nearly two hundred were capable. Remark, too, that the neatness with which the articles are executed, such as lace, baby-linen, straw-platting, is the more praise-worthy, as it is done by the women in the evenings, *after they return from labouring in the fields*.[6]

Miss Flint also reports triumphantly that in Galway a woman who had been given a loan by a reproductive fund to buy wool for spinning refused to sell it when her family fell ill of fever: 'The struggle was severe, but her better feelings prevailed, and she was heard to exclaim, in her own expressive language, "No – *no* distress shall make me do that; it is a sacred trust" – There!'[7] While the women's competitive reporting is comic, these evidences of Irish industry and honesty are an early rebuke to Gerald's disdain for the Irish, and the neat and clean seamstresses are a pointed contrast to another Irishman at the party, the devious convert

Cornelius O'Hanlon, who arrives wearing a 'national wrap-rascal' and hobnailed boots, mired in the mud of the London streets.[8]

In fact, the national costume of the Irish was generally assumed to be rags; in Charles Dickens's *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843-44), Martin is astounded when he meets in New York 'a man with such a thoroughly Irish face, that it seemed as if he ought, as a matter of right and principle, to be in rags, and could have no sort of business to be looking cheerfully at anybody out of a whole suit of clothes'.[9] The ability to sew was therefore a key indicator of the capacity and desire of the Irish – specifically Irish women – to improve. In 'Learning to Sew', the second of Mary Leadbeater's *Cottage Dialogues Among the Irish Peasantry* (1811), the prudent Rose chides the flighty Nancy for her reluctance to mend the rents in her gown: 'Being poor may make us go in old and threadbare clothes, but want of neatness and industry alone can keep us in ragged ones. Indeed, when I see a working man in ragged clothes, I can't help, in my own mind, blaming his wife, or sister, or mother'.[10] Irish raggedness was also a disincentive to charity; Rose points out that Lady Belfield gave a coat to Jack, whose old one was patched, rather than to Tom, whose coat hung in rags, because Jack was likely to make good use of the gift, whereas Tom would quickly reduce the new one to rags 'for want of a stitch'.[11]

In her *Letters from Ireland* (1852), Harriet Martineau recorded that Leadbeater's daughter-in-law had taught fancy knitting to a bed-ridden woman and her daughters. More than two hundred women and girls were now employed in the area making 'Spider Mitts', 'Impalpable Mitts', and 'Cobweb Mitts', 'and people who knew Stradbally thirty years ago are so struck with the improvement in the appearance of the place, that they declare that the lowest order of the cabins appears to them to be actually swept away'.[12] This is not an isolated example; Martineau describes how 'In every house of the gentry one now sees sofas, chairs, screens, and fancy tables spread with covers of crochet-work – all done by the hands of peasant women', while in the south west 'lace of a really fine quality is made in cabins where formerly hard-handed women did the dirtiest work about the potato-patch and piggery'.[13] The Mayor of Cork, John Francis Maguire, says of a lace collar produced at the Blackrock school in the early 1850s: 'though it had not been washed, it looked as if it had not been touched by mortal fingers, – such is the neatness of the children, who have been drilled into a habit of cleanliness which had never been known in their homes before'.[14] Lace-making provided an opportunity for the Irish poor not just to survive the Famine, but to improve in ways British and middle-class Irish observers very much approved of.

Industry and Regeneration

Irish lace was recognized as much more than a decorative object; it was freighted with national pride, moral value, cultural prejudice, imperial ideas of civilization, pity, and hope for the future. The *Nation*, reporting on a meeting of the Board of Manufactures and Industry, was keen to emphasize that the Irish lace being prepared for the Great Exhibition represented more than just a charitable enterprise; it was also an indication of Ireland's wider industrial potential, and ability to compete internationally: 'The lace of Limerick has now attained a European reputation and pre-eminence! […] Have we achieved all this in lace, and shall we despair of achieving as much in other branches […]? Forbid it common sense, forbid it history!'[15] 'Whatever may be said of the rest of the Irish nation', commented the *Morning Post* rather acidly, the lace displayed at the Dublin Exhibition in 1853 proved at least that 'its ladies are by no means in want of industry, taste, and ingenuity'.[16] Irish lace was highlighted in many reports of the 1851 Great Exhibition, a rare positive news story about the Famine, and a responsible means of charitable support. The correspondent for the *Lady's Newspaper* stated it was 'worthy of great attention' as 'a source of existence for many of the poor girls of the sister isle'.[17] The lace schools were praised as much as their product. Maguire described the Cork Embroidery School in 1852 as ‘one of the noblest monuments of that active and practical charity which had its origin in the sad year of Famine’,[18] while Mr and Mrs S.C. Hall said the ladies of Cork had ‘rescued hundreds – nay thousands – from the gripe of misery and death’, and they urged strangers to visit the embroidery school if they wanted to carry away ‘pleasant memories of an Irish tour’ in a country still ravaged by disease and famine.[19] For Asenath Nicholson the industrial schools represented hope for the future in an otherwise blasted land:

> These schools, scattered through the island in the midst of the desolating Famine, looked to the traveler like some humble violet or flower, springing in the desert or prairie, where a scathing fire had swept over the plain […]. And looking upon these happy faces one might feel that Ireland is not wholly lost.[20]

These private initiatives, managed by ladies and nuns, were largely unsupported by government. Indeed, when the Belfast Ladies Relief Committee appealed to the British Treasury for financial assistance, they were informed that ‘such intervention lay beyond the scope of government’.[21] Their popularity and effect was also in stark contrast to the public works and outdoor relief schemes. Unlike the notorious Famine roads, lace-making was productive labour, with the potential to become a viable national industry. It provided work for women and girls who were generally neglected by the public works schemes. In a letter to the Central Relief Committee of the Society of Friends in 1847, Maria Edgeworth commented:

> A poor woman the other day in thanking our vicar for the assistance he gave in employing men and boys, regretted that when as much was done for men, nothing

> has been thought of for women or children, who are, as she said, also anxious for work; if they could be employed and paid, they would work to their utmost.[22]

Edgeworth suggested that donating a small sum to buy materials and pay women for needlework and knitting would prove 'profitable in a pecuniary point of view, and in a much greater degree useful both now and hereafter in preventing them from losing the proper sense of shame, or becoming mere beggars and paupers, and sinking into idleness and consequent vice'. Patricia Lysaght notes that some women were employed on the roads, making drains and drawing stones, but they were paid less than the men, and concerns were expressed about their 'poor neglected children'.[23] Lace-making had the advantage that it could be done from home, so children could be cared for, and cabins, more often than not associated with the dung-heap at the door, had to be improved in order to accommodate it: thatched roofs were lined and chimneys installed, and both space and worker kept clean and tidy to protect the fabric.[24]

Lace-making also offered an alternative to the workhouse, not just for the individual, but her entire family. Susanna Meredith relates several examples of little girls who earned enough to take their families out of the workhouse one by one.[25] Maguire calculated that the 80 girls who had been discharged from the workhouse and were now supporting themselves with the help of St Mary's Industrial School were not only saving the rate-payer £320 a year, but were also 'the means of supporting a second person – a mother, a sister, or a young brother – whom she has taken out of the Workhouse, in consequence of having found employment'.[26] Meredith pointedly describes lace-making as 'this system of "out-door relief"';[27] in contrast with the soup-kitchens, it provided a respectable and happy independence. While, as Margaret Kelleher has argued, women and children were frequently portrayed as the preeminent Famine victims,[28] the lace-maker offers a contrasting image of the heroic female saviour of the family. Maguire describes fishermen's families in Blackrock, once dependent on the 'strong and powerful father' and 'the vigorous son', now 'protected from hunger and misery by the fingers of the feeble child, and saved from the workhouse by her cheerful and untiring toil'. One man, unable to find work, rose at 5am to hold thread for the daughter 'upon whose feeble hands, but practised skill and loving heart, depended his salvation from starvation or the workhouse'.[29] While the 1851 census shows a decline in the lace industry – from 337 weavers of lace and 318 manufacturers of lace in 1841 to 188 weavers of lace and 42 manufacturers of lace in 1851 – there was an increase in laceworkers from 1207 to 1905, and notably in laceworkers under the age of 15 from 189 to 412.[30] Mrs Meredith also notes that the 1851 census returned 902 pupils in schools of embroidery, crochet, knitting, netting, and tatting, 'but these figures did not represent the extent of the exertion to diffuse the knowledge of needlework'.[31] The figures also do not represent those who were enabled to emigrate during the Famine as a result of their earnings from lace-making.

In *Eva O'Beirne; or, The Little Lace Maker*, one of a series of Catholic moral tales for children published in Dublin in 1856 by 'Brother James', eleven-year-old Eva has helped support her family, since the death of her father from fever, through lace-making. Her teacher, Sister Agnes, had gone to Belgium specially to learn how to make it, 'in order that she might introduce it here, and give the poor a better means of earning a comfortable livelihood'.[32] Eva sells her wares through a kindly milliner, who praises Eva to her genteel client, Mrs Butler Adair, not just for the quality of her work, but its evidence of her industry; Eva 'plied her fingers, night and day' not only to earn money, but also to inspire her brother Phil to work their ground.[33]

Unfortunately, the O'Beirnes are due to be evicted by the agent of their absentee landlord, who wants to consolidate the property and replace tenants with cattle. Luckily, Mrs

Butler Adair is about to become engaged to the landlord, Sir Marmaduke Banbury, and persuades him that Sister Agnes is a better political economist than his agent: she has turned Eva into an artist, ‘by whose skill our national character is raised, and by whose earnings, Mr. Wilson’s own balance-sheet looks much pleasanter in his own eyes, at the year’s end, than it would otherwise have done’.[34] Their visit to the O’Beirnes’ clean and tidy cottage, and a lecture on lace-making from Eva, confirms the good opinion, and Sir Marmaduke decides to stop the evictions, revise the rents, and grant long leases to the improving tenants, and also to spend his holidays in Ireland rather than going to Germany. As his soon-to-be wife is about to convert to Catholicism, it seems likely he will too. The story ends with Eva, now ‘the happiest lace-worker of which any history ever made mention’, the right-hand of the new Lady Banbury.[35] The *Freeman’s Journal* praised the ‘tone of Catholic morality’ of Brother James’s ‘charming little Irish stories’, as ‘a quality which might be looked for in vain in the innumerable publications for children with which we are inundated by the London press’.[36] Equally unusual, however, is the portrayal at this time of a happy lace-worker.

The Starving Seamstress

The Irish needlewoman rescuing herself and her family from famine offers a fascinating counter-narrative to the prevailing discourse on the seamstress in England in the 1840s and ’50s, who had become ‘a stylized symbol of the suffering caused by urban industrialism among the working poor generally’.[37] In a series of government reports, newspaper exposés, novels, plays, short stories, and poems, the seamstress emerged as an innocent victim of capitalist exploitation, impoverished and exhausted by the demands of a tyrannical employer and the heartlessness of their wealthy clients, lured into prostitution or condemned to a lengthy decline and death.[38] She was also represented as starving, and in fact frequently evoked descriptions of Famine victims. *Punch*’s November 1843 article ‘Famine and

Fashion!' describes the case of a seamstress called Biddell, 'A wretched-looking woman […] with a squalid half-starved infant at her breast', who was tried for pawning trousers she was making for the slop-seller Mr Moses to buy dry bread for herself and her two children.[39] The following month, *Punch* published Thomas Hood's poem 'The Song of the Shirt', probably the most significant and widely-read version of the victimized seamstress. Hood's speaker, dressed in 'unwomanly rags', is sewing 'A Shroud as well as a Shirt'. She lives 'In poverty, hunger, and dirt', and her wages are 'A bed of straw, / A crust of bread – and rags'. She is famished and skeletal:

> But why do I talk of Death!
>   That Phantom of grisly bone,
> I hardly fear his terrible shape,
>   It seems so like my own –
>   It seems so like my own,
>   Because of the fasts I keep,
> Oh! God! that bread should be so dear,
>   And flesh and blood so cheap![40]

This was an important poem for Irish writers; Anna Maria Hall offered to write for *Hood's Magazine* for free, as a tribute to the author of 'The Song of the Shirt'.[41] Meredith used a stanza of 'The Song of the Shirt' as the epigraph to her book *The Lacemakers*, even though the image it presents is at odds with her intention of offering needlework as a symbol of regeneration. Most strikingly, in July 1847 the *Dublin University Magazine* published 'The Song of the Famine', a poem modelled closely on 'The Song of the Shirt'. Hood's two refrains, 'Work! work! work!' and 'Stitch! stitch! stitch!', emphasizing the monotonous labour of the seamstress, multiply into the triple exclamations of a famished mother: ‘Want!’, ‘Food!’, ‘Home!’ ‘Death!’, ‘Cold!’, and ‘Sick!’[42] Both women are in rags and starving. Their city dwellings are similar, the seamstress’s ‘shatter’d roof’ and ‘naked floor’ mirrored in the mother’s ‘miry floor’ and ‘dripping roof’. The urban setting of this Famine poem is relatively unusual, as Famine victims were frequently depicted in rural cabins.[43] The seamstress works ‘Till the brain begins to swim’, while the mother is fevered, ‘With an aching, swimming brain’.

However, the misery of the mother far surpasses that of the seamstress. While the seamstress has at least ‘A bed of straw’, ‘A table’, and ‘a broken chair’, the mother has only ‘a little straw’, ‘the empty space’ where her kettle and pot should be, and ‘the naked coffin of deal’ containing the dead body of her child. The seamstress’s ‘crust of bread’ is more palatable than the ‘hard crust’ the mother had tried to feed to her son, which ‘came too late’: ‘It lay dry between the dying lips, / And I loathed it – yet I ate’. ‘The Song of the Shirt’ ends with the wish that the song ‘could reach the Rich!’, but the mother’s message is more urgent:

> Beware before you spurn,
> Ere the cravings of the famishing
>   To loathing madness turn.

In using Hood’s poem as a model, the author of ‘The Song of the Famine’ draws on the huge public sympathy demonstrated for the seamstress, a sympathy which was not always forthcoming for the Irish. That the misery of the English seamstress and the Irish Famine victim were paralleled is also confirmed by a comparison in the *Illustrated London News* in December 1849:

> A great and just sympathy is just now excited by the sufferings of the needlewomen of the metropolis […]. But they at least find shelter; most of them have clothing; they manage to get food, though the supply is scanty; and the most crowded lodging-house of the metropolis is a palace compared with the Scalp, or burrowing hole, of the Irish peasant.[44]

In the Irish context, sewing is represented as an alternative to starvation, rather than the cause of it, and the seamstress, rather than a symbol of the economic exploitation of the poor by middle-class employers or clients, is generally supported by them: provided with instruction in needlework, with threads and materials, with access to a ready market, and frequently given the whole earnings of the exchange.

In English novels and visual representations, ladies were frequently criticized for being complicit in the destruction of the seamstress, as for example in John Tenniel's *Punch* cartoon 'The Haunted Lady, Or "The Ghost" in the Looking Glass' from 1863 (**Figure 7.2)**.[45] Part 4 of Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna's *The Wrongs of Woman* (1844) represents the misery of English lace-runners, who work twenty hours a day to supply the insatiable demands of 'a market that numbers among its customers, in one branch or another, every grade of society, from the Queen upon the throne to the village barmaid, who cannot serve beer out to her master's customers without a bit of edging to her simple cap'.[46] The country girl Kate Clarke is lured to a lace-district with the promise of a job which will keep her out of the factories her father dreads, but finds herself instead 'fettered […] not less strongly than is the galley-slave by his iron chain' to the monotonous task of drawing out lace threads.[47] Her employer, the impoverished Mrs Collins, like most women of the district, exists on a pittance for running, hemming, pearling, and mending machine-made lace, and relies on her children – one of whom, Sally, is as young as three – to work alongside her. Domestic tasks are ignored or performed hurriedly by her husband on his return from work. Her baby is drugged with laudanum to allow his mother to work unhindered; soon a ‘breathing corpse of a babe […] haggard, ghastly, and dwindling away’, he catches measles and dies.[48] When Mrs Collins asks her employer for an advance to pay for the funeral and mitigate the costs of family illness, she is lectured on the imprudence of the poor having children, and a heavy hint is dropped that Kate might easily supply the family’s deficit by selling herself: ‘She’s good-looking enough, and may find ways of helping you out, as many others do’.[49]

The story ends with Kate on the brink of the traditional fall of the seamstress into prostitution; destitute and desperate, she is last seen entering a theatrical establishment, her final words, muttered through clenched teeth, ‘Let them answer it’, an echo of Mrs Collins’s imprecation:

> [W]hen I began to put my little one to slave, I knew it was wrong and wicked; and I did it because I was forced to do it; and I laid the sin of it at the door of the rich manufacturer, to answer at the day of judgment for whatever harm might come to the bodies or souls of me or mine, from such unnatural starving. […] Ay, and THEY SHALL ANSWER it![50]

Tonna goes further: it is not the rich manufacturer alone who will be punished for this suffering; ‘England’s sons’ could have prevented ‘this murderous crusade of wealth against poverty’ through legislation, but had chosen not to interpose, and as for English women:

> double shame, twice doubled be to the fair and fascinating daughters of England, who well know that they might, if they would, so bring the cause of their destitute sisters before the eyes, and so impress them on the hearts and consciences of

> those fathers, brothers, husbands, lovers, sons of theirs, as to rouse them to the fulfilment of a duty, for the due performance of which the Providence of God placed them where they are![51]

Tonna's *Wrongs* are therefore not only done *to* women but *by* women, and indicate a state of society so warped by the enslavement of the poor (and in particular of women) in industry that 'some fearful act of vengeance' by the Almighty is inevitably imminent: 'the fair inheritance of England's Queen is becoming but as a throne whose pillars rest on an awakening volcano'.[52]

By contrast, the industries begun by ladies in Ireland are, according to Meredith, a 'most humane commerce',[53] and the relationship between seamstress and lady is an ethical rather than a financial one. Lace-making in Ireland is 'a war against misery, in which every woman's hand in the land was engaged—the delicate touch of the peeress assisting the rough fingers of the peasant'.[54] The Queen's patronage of Irish lace is frequently mentioned in reports of the Great Exhibition and national exhibitions, and in fiction: the lace Eva makes is 'fitted to adorn the person of a queen (and a good queen too)', while Meredith's Mary Desmond creates lace for the Queen's sunshade.[55] Rather than a volcano beneath the pillars of the throne, it was hoped that Irish industry would reinforce the bonds of the Union; philanthropic women 'taught the peasantry to see in their rulers their friends'.[56] While the English seamstress, separated from her family, was exposed to the dangers of the city, particularly of prostitution, and contagious disease in unhealthy workrooms, the Irish seamstress was learning to be industrious, obedient, and clean, becoming a reliable and self-reliant prop for her family, and protecting them from the dangers of starvation and the workhouse. While the English seamstress was at the mercy of her employers and their wealthy clients, the Irish seamstress was educated, nurtured, and supported by hers.

Bony Fingers and Commerce

However, Irish writers were heavily influenced by the discourse on the seamstress in English fiction. In Mary Anne Hoare's story 'The Knitted Collar' (1848), fourteen-year-old Mary Sullivan and her family are starving in the attic of an old house in an Irish city in November 1846. Mary seems a composite of both the Irish and the English seamstress. She has learned the art of fine knitting 'while attending an excellent charity-school', and has been given thread by Jane Brown, emphasising the charitable support of other women in her maintenance. Her father, a shoemaker who destroyed himself through drink, has been judged undeserving of charity, and his family 'literally left to perish' with him. Mary's attempt '*to do something*' challenges the stereotype of Irish apathy and indolence. But, like the English seamstress, Mary and those like her struggle to earn a pittance: 'The delicate fabrics, both in knitting and embroidery, which many a bony finger worked at till the hollow eye grew dim, were often disposed of for two or three pence beyond the price of the materials'.[57] The Irish lady who buys the collar from Mary in the street, Mrs Elliott, behaves more like the women in the English seamstress narratives, exploiting the vulnerable position of the impoverished child. Knowing that a milliner would charge five shillings for such fine work, she refuses Mary's price of two shillings, and offers one, dismissing Mary's plea that her parents and brothers are starving as 'the old story', and congratulating herself on the bargain. When she next sees Mary a month later, the child, no longer able to knit due to her failing strength and the December light, has fainted while begging in the street; Mrs Elliott's husband finds the bodies of her parents and sister, and rescues her brothers. The remnant of the family, saved only indirectly by Mary's bony fingers, are cared for, and Mrs Elliott learns her lesson: 'though thrifty, as a housewife should be, in buying from rich tradespeople, [she] has never been known to cheapen the work of the poor, since the day on which she purchased the *knitted collar*'.[58] Hoare was from County Cork, and may well have known of the work of the convents and embroidery schools in enabling girls to earn a living from knitting and lace-making, but her choice of a plot structure which aligns more closely with the English seamstress narrative is dictated by her publication in an English periodical, and her purpose in drawing attention to the immediate need for charitable donation for Famine victims. Presenting the child as a seamstress as well as a Famine victim might prove a more effective persuasion.

Susanna Meredith's *The Lacemakers*, published in 1865, offers another fascinating version of the narrative. Meredith had been widowed during the Famine; her husband, a doctor, died of cholera. Her father, the Governor of the County Gaol at Cork, had organized a soup kitchen, and Meredith roused herself from her grief to open the Adelaide School to teach peasant girls to crochet lace. Her sister comments that 'Nothing gave her greater pleasure than to be told by any of her crochet pupils that they earned by a week's work what supported their father and mother and paid the week's rent, and such instances were not uncommon during the famine time'.[59] Meredith published two articles on 'The Cultivation of Female Industry in Ireland' in the *Englishwoman's Journal* in 1862, but deciding that 'dry statistical statements do not inform anybody about Ireland' as '[t]here is some curious want of faculty in the Saxon constitution to digest this crude mass', she returned to the subject in *The Lacemakers* in 1865, reprinting the two articles, followed by three stories, because '[f]iction, decidedly, has done more than anything else to make known this *terra incognita*'.[60] Meredith's national stereotypes do not end with the Saxon.

Of the three stories she presents, the two which offer a positive outcome feature Anglo-Irish ladies in reduced circumstances, who benefit much more from their 'humane commerce' than the girls they teach. In 'Ellen Harrington', the eponymous heroine, a little girl, nurses her aunt and uncle (the local clergyman) who contract fever while ministering to the local poor in 1848. Ellen, like Mary in ‘The Knitted Collar’, is ‘the only person in the household able to do anything’, and following her aunt and uncle’s deaths, she uses £5 given her by a naval officer to buy thread, and teaches children to make crochet edgings, which are sold in Cork. Her plan is to ‘get quite rich’ herself, while ‘the poor children will be earning a living’.[61] When Ellen is offered an opportunity to leave Ireland to study at the Kensington School of Art, she seizes it, but her eventual marriage to Dr Neligan and emigration to Australia is partly enabled by the girls she left behind; in gratitude for his comfort of the sick during the Famine, the girls give Dr Neligan a large parcel of lace, a notable sacrifice on their part, to help pay his passage to America, where he earns a lucrative living from the export of lace. In ‘The Redeemed Estate’, Meredith emphasizes that all classes suffered during the Famine. The genteel Fitzwalter sisters experience ‘positive, real hunger’ after their bankrupt father fakes his death and flees to the continent, and their potato crop is destroyed.[62] Unable to find situations as governesses due to the ‘superabundance of the “reduced-lady” class’, they begin making lace to support their family.[63] Initially, they are ashamed of their need for the money, working under cover of charity, but eventually the Fitzwalters become proud of and embrace their occupation: ‘They had taken *to work*, and they liked it; and were determined to be independent’.[64] Their ‘genius, dexterity and industry’ provides an income for them and the poor girls they teach during the Famine, and helps to clear the debt from the estate.[65]

For Meredith, ‘[c]rochet was topographical’, not only because stitches were localized and peculiar to particular areas, but because it expressed the national characteristics of its makers.[66] The Anglo-Irish women who took it up did so as a ‘stern business effort’, and ‘kept it within rules and restrictions, according to the nature of their orderly habits’; the Celts embraced it as ‘a wild enterprise’, ‘a poem wrought with passion’, and to this disorderliness

Meredith traced the failure of the industry. The inventiveness of the Celt, without the necessary artistic training, led to degenerate aberrations:

> Their crude fancies knotted and gnarled the thread into shapes so various and extraordinary, that to examine them became a study—not of lace, but of people. Poor little girls! their notions of beauty were as rudimentary as those of the early races; […]. They seemed, indeed, to begin at the beginning of woman's decorative conceptions, and unconsciously to produce the same forms that suggested themselves to the Babylonians, and to Pharoah's daughters, ignoring all that subsequent civilizations have done for feminine taste.[67]

In one of the factual chapters preceding the stories, Meredith describes a little girl who arrived as a 'small bundle of dark cloth, dripping wet' at the crochet-school of the Cork Poor Relief Society:

> The humanity of the object was scarcely discernible through the dirty encumbrance of its dishevelled hair, and the involution of an old cloak that composed its only garment. But this was a person, and had a mind of its own, though as untutored in the conventionalisms of civilized life as the gorilla of M. du Chaillu.[68]

This semi-human bundle of rags had begged a penny to buy a needle and thread, and is celebrated for her success: 'This same child, through her exertions, enabled her mother and sisters to come out of the work-house […]. In a short time they had a little home, and have managed to keep it'.[69] However, the disjunction between the barely-clothed worker and the decorative fabric she creates, and between the insistence on her personhood and the comparison of her to a gorilla, is disturbing.

In the final story, ‘Mary Desmond’, Meredith depicts ‘a thorough-bred Celt’ whose ‘very rags were picturesque’; Mary’s clothing—a soldier’s scarlet coat, a petticoat made from a blue bathing dress, and a yellow handkerchief— is accidentally assembled, yet mysteriously artful: ‘how they hung upon her, so as to drape her according to the laws and taste of harmony, were mysteries, deepened by the knowledge of the way in which Irish beggars obtained their clothing’.[70] She is extremely gifted with the needle, but unmanageable. She fails to fulfil orders, ignores patterns, and lies, as do the other uneducated workers: ‘The cunning they displayed, and the unprincipled treachery with which they behaved to every employer, gave sad evidence of a very low state of morals’.[71] They are corrupted by the sudden influx of money offered by lace-making, spending it on fine clothes and Temperance Balls, or even worse, donations to Young Ireland, for ‘Satan’s power was also connected with busy fingers’.[72] Mary’s friends, the Gorman sisters, are so lacking in control that Mary colludes in a plot to have them incarcerated in a Magdalen asylum— a system Meredith seems to approve of as ‘a good plan for getting them bodily out of harm’s way’.[73] Mary herself is embroiled in a melodramatic plot: she steals a painting from her Protestant employers, the Blacks, under orders from her priest, aids in the embezzlement of documents and cash from the Blacks by her nationalist lover, and marries Miss Black’s fiancé, who claims they are not truly married as he is a Protestant, and abandons her and their child. At the end of the story, Mary is in a situation familiar in English seamstress narratives: a fallen woman, living in a filthy garret, miserable and ill. Her baby dies, and she enters a Magdalen asylum.

By the time she wrote *The Lacemakers*, Meredith was living in London, and very doubtful about the long-term viability of lace-making in Ireland. Her Adelaide School in

Cork had closed in 1859, and while lace was still being produced in the area, it was coarse and inferior, Meredith says, due to the disinclination of the workers to take the trouble to produce a premium product that could outlast the fluctuating demands of the market.[74] Meredith, and those such as Ben Lindsey and Alan S. Cole who were calling for better education in lace design in Ireland in the 1880s, were disappointed that the possibility of an enduring craft industry was being squandered for short-term gain. However, as Jacinta Prunty points out, schools such as St Mary's Industrial Institute, set up by Margaret Louisa Aylward's Ladies Association of Charity in 1853, often failed because it was asking too much of destitute women to attend and persevere before they could earn enough to live.[75] It was perhaps also too much to expect those who undertook the work in desperation to develop into artists who valued the craft above the financial lifeline it offered. Heather Castles has argued that, judged as a source of permanent, well-paid employment, the efforts of women like Meredith were at best partially successful, but as a famine-relief initiative it was a highly successful intervention.[76] Even if many of those who were taught lace-making abandoned it once they had earned enough to emigrate, its primary purpose had been served. The scheme was also successful in inspiring the middle-class women who founded the lace-schools to 'burst the bonds of conventionalisms';[77] many of those who would go on to lead the suffrage campaign or revolutionize women's education in Ireland, such as Anne Jellicoe and Anna Maria Haslam, began their public careers by setting up embroidery schools in their home towns during the Famine.[78] After moving to England, Susanna Meredith campaigned for women's access to employment, and founded an international network of prison missions to provide refuges and work for women leaving prison. This 'humane commerce' provided other tangible legacies than lace.

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[1] Fintan O'Toole, *A History of Ireland in 100 Objects* (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 2013), no. 86.

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[2] Ada K. Longfield, *Catalogue to the Collection of Lace* (Dublin: Stationery Office, 1937), 58.

[3] Ben Lindsey, *Irish Lace: Its Origin and History* (Dublin: Hodges, Figgis, and Co., 1886), 22.

[4] Lindsey, *Irish Lace*, 4; Longfield, *Catalogue to the Collection of Lace*, 50-51.

[5] Lindsey, *Irish Lace*, 6-7; John Francis Maguire, *The Industrial Movement in Ireland, as Illustrated by the National Exhibition of 1852* (Cork: John O'Brien; London: Simpkin, Marshall and Co., 1853), 186-87.

[6] John Banim, *The Anglo-Irish of the Nineteenth Century: A Novel*, 3 Vols. (London: Henry Colburn, 1828), Vol. I, 247. Italics in original.

[7] Banim, *The Anglo-Irish of the Nineteenth Century*, Vol. I, 249.

[8] Ibid., 199-200.

[9] Charles Dickens, *Martin Chuzzlewit*, ed. Margaret Cardwell (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 286.

[10] Mary Leadbeater, *Cottage Dialogues Among the Irish Peasantry* (London: J. Johnson and Co., 1811), 10.

[11] Leadbeater, *Cottage Dialogues*, 10-11.

[12] Harriet Martineau, *Letters from Ireland* (London: John Chapman, 1852), 67-68.

[13] Martineau, *Letter from Ireland*, 68-69.

[14] Maguire, *The Industrial Movement in Ireland*, 209.

[15] 'Manufacture Movement', the *Nation*, 29 Mar. 1851, 2.

[16] 'The Dublin Industrial Exhibition', *Morning Post*, 31 Oct. 1853, 3.

[17] 'The Great Exhibition: Pencillings by a Lady', *Lady's Newspaper*, 7 Jun. 1851, 319.

[18] Maguire, *The Industrial Movement in Ireland*, 194.

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[19] Mr and Mrs S.C. Hall, *Handbooks for Ireland: The South and Killarney* (London: Virtue, Hall & Virtue; Dublin: James M'Glashan, 1853), 26-28.

[20] Asenath Nicholson, *Annals of the Famine in Ireland* (1851), ed. Maureen Murphy (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 1998), 80, 145.

[21] Christine Kinealy, *This Great Calamity: The Irish Famine 1845-52* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1994), 166.

[22] Maria Edgeworth, 'Letter to Central Relief Committee (1847)', in Angela Bourke et al. (eds.), *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2002), Vol. 5, 698-99.

[23] Patricia Lysaght, 'Perspectives on Women during the Great Irish Famine from the Oral Tradition', *Béaloideas*, 64-65 (1996-97), 79.

[24] Claudia Kinmonth, *Irish Rural Interiors in Art* (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 2006), 110-11.

[25] Susanna Meredith, 'Needlework v. Domestic Service', *The Lacemakers: Sketches of Irish Character, with some Account of the Effort to Establish Lacemaking in Ireland* (London: Jackson, Walford, and Hodder, 1865), 44-45.

[26] Maguire, *The Industrial Movement in Ireland*, 221.

[27] Meredith, 'Needlework v. Domestic Service', *The Lacemakers*, 45.

[28] Margaret Kelleher, *The Feminization of Famine: Expressions of the Inexpressible?* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997).

[29] Maguire, *The Industrial Movement in Ireland*, 205-206, 237.

[30] *Report of the Commissioners Appointed to Take the Census of Ireland, For the Year 1841* (Dublin: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1843), 440; *The Census of Ireland for the Year 1851, Part VI: General Report* (Dublin: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1856), 634.

[31] Meredith, 'Lace-making in Ireland', *The Lacemakers*, 6.

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[32] 'Brother James', *Eva O'Beirne; or, The Little Lace Maker* (Dublin: James Duffy, 1856), 2. Loeber and Loeber identify him in *A Guide to Irish Fiction* as James Reynolds, a surgeon, apothecary, and fiction writer, with a medical practice in Booterstown (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2006).

[33] 'Brother James', *Eva O'Beirne*, 2-3.

[34] 'Brother James', *Eva O'Beirne*, 17.

[35] 'Brother James', *Eva O'Beirne*, 31.

[36] 'Literature: Brother James's Tales', *Freeman's Journal*, 12 Jul. 1856, 3.

[37] Lynn M. Alexander, *Women, Work, and Representation: Needlewomen in Victorian Art and Literature* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2003), 18.

[38] See Beth Harris (ed.), *Famine and Fashion: Needlewomen in the Nineteenth Century* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 1-10.

[39] 'Famine and Fashion!', *Punch*, 4 Nov. 1843, 203. This passage cites a report in the *Times*, 27 Oct. 1843, 4.

[40] Thomas Hood, 'The Song of the Shirt', *Punch*, 16 Dec. 1843, 260.

[41] Susan Casteras, '"Weary Stitches": Illustrations and Painting for Thomas Hood's "Song of the Shirt" and Other Poems', in Harris (ed.), *Famine and Fashion*, 21.

[42] 'The Song of the Famine', *Dublin University Magazine*, 30.175 (1847), 102-104.

[43] See, for instance, the 'wretched cabin by the roadside' in Chapter XXIX of William Carleton's *The Black Prophet* (1847), the 'miserable, low-roofed, damp, ragged tenement' in Chapter XXXIII of Anthony Trollope's *Castle Richmond* (1860), and the mud cabin of the Molloys in Vol II Chapter XVII of Margaret Brew's *The Chronicles of Castle Cloyne* (1885).

[44] 'General State of Kilrush', *Illustrated London News*, 15 Dec. 1849, 394.

[45] See Kenny Meadows's 'Death and the Drawing Room, or the Young Dressmakers of England', *The Illuminated Magazine*, 1 (May-Oct 1843), 97; John Leech's 'Pin Money /

Needle Money', *Punch*, 23 Dec. 1849, 238; John Tenniel's 'The Haunted Lady, or 'The Ghost' in the Looking-Glass', *Punch*, 4 Jul. 1863, 5.

[46] Charlotte Elizabeth [Tonna], *The Wrongs of Woman: Part IV: The Lace-Runners* (London: W. H. Dalton, 1844), 4-5.

[47] Charlotte Elizabeth [Tonna], *The Wrongs of Woman*, 8.

[48] Charlotte Elizabeth [Tonna], *The Wrongs of Woman*, 47.

[49] Charlotte Elizabeth [Tonna], *The Wrongs of Woman*, 73.

[50] Charlotte Elizabeth [Tonna], *The Wrongs of Woman*, 57-58.

[51] Charlotte Elizabeth [Tonna], *The Wrongs of Woman*, 96-97.

[52] Charlotte Elizabeth [Tonna], *The Wrongs of Woman*, 138.

[53] Meredith, 'Ellen Harrington', in *The Lacemakers*, 98.

[54] Meredith, 'Lace-making in Ireland', in *The Lacemakers*, 2.

[55] 'Brother James', *Eva O'Beirne*, 13; Meredith, 'Mary Desmond', in *The Lacemakers*, 356.

[56] Lindsey, *Irish Lace*, 27. Reports of the Queen's expenditure in support of Irish lace contrast with accusations of meanness in charitable donations: James H. Murphy notes the longstanding myth that she gave only £5 to famine relief (she actually donated £2,500). James H. Murphy, 'Fashioning the famine queen', in Peter Gray (ed.), *Victoria's Ireland? Irishness and Britishness, 1837-1901* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2004), 24.

[57] Mary Anne Hoare, 'The Knitted Collar', in *Shamrock Leaves; or, Tales and Sketches of Ireland* (Dublin: J. M'Glashan; London: Partridge & Oakey, 1851), 58-59. The story had previously been published in the *London Pioneer*, 6 Apr. 1848, 811.

[58] Hoare, 'The Knitted Collar', 66-67.

[59] M. A. Lloyd, *Susanna Meredith: A Record of a Vigorous Life* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1903), 11, 13-16.

[60] Meredith, 'Preface', *The Lacemakers*, viii-ix.

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[61] Meredith, ‘Ellen Harrington’, 68, 75-76.

[62] Meredith, ‘The Redeemed Estate’, in *The Lacemakers*, 169.

[63] Meredith, ‘The Redeemed Estate’, in *The Lacemakers*, 171.

[64] Meredith, ‘The Redeemed Estate’, in *The Lacemakers*, 180.

[65] Meredith, ‘The Redeemed Estate’, in *The Lacemakers*, 202.

[66] Meredith, ‘Ellen Harrington’, 90-91.

[67] Meredith, ‘Ellen Harrington’, 86.

[68] Meredith, ‘Needlework v. Domestic Service’, in *The Lacemakers*, 42-43.

[69] Meredith, ‘Needlework v. Domestic Service’, in *The Lacemakers*, 44.

[70] Meredith, ‘Mary Desmond’, in *The Lacemakers*, 208-209.

[71] Meredith, ‘Mary Desmond’, in *The Lacemakers*, 226.

[72] Meredith, ‘Mary Desmond’, in *The Lacemakers*, 234.

[73] Meredith, ‘Mary Desmond’, in *The Lacemakers*, 293.

[74] Meredith, ‘Lace-making in Ireland’, in *The Lacemakers*, 15-16.

[75] Jacinta Prunty, ‘Margaret Louisa Aylward’, in Mary Cullen and Maria Luddy (eds.), *Women, Power and Consciousness in 19th-Century Ireland: Eight Biographical Studies* (Dublin: Attic Press, 1995), 64.

[76] Heather Castles, ‘Hybrid stitched textile art: contemporary interpretations of mid nineteenth century Irish Crochet lace making’, unpublished PhD diss. (University of Ulster, 2011), 113.

[77] Meredith, ‘Lace-making in Ireland’, *The Lacemakers*, 6.

[78] Anne V. O’Connor, ‘Anne Jellicoe’ and Mary Cullen, ‘Anna Maria Haslam’, in Cullen and Luddy (eds.), *Women, Power and Consciousness in 19th-Century Ireland*, 128, 164.