

How the Other Three-Quarters Lived: The Cabin in Famine Literature

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Travellers to Ireland before, during, and after the Famine engaged in an ethnographic exploration of what Harriet Martineau called ‘cabin life’.¹ For outsiders, the cabin seemed not just a place, but a way of being which identified the Irish peasant much more closely with the inhabitants of Hottentot kraals or Indian wigwams, or indeed with the animals they shared their cabins with, than their fellow British observers. The American Asenath Nicholson frequently referred to the peasants she sought out just prior to and during the Famine as ‘cabiners’,² and they were in the majority. The 1841 census commissioners for Ireland divided Irish housing into four classes:

in the lowest, or fourth class, were comprised all mud cabins having one room – in the third, a better description of cottage, still built of mud, but varying from 2 to 4 rooms and windows – in the second, a good farm house, or in towns, a house in a small street, having from 5 to 9 rooms and windows – and in the first, all houses of a better description than the preceding classes.³

More than three-quarters of houses in Ireland were in the third and fourth class, with little to differentiate them; the commissioners at first intended to put them together, but ‘thought it desirable to retain at present a separate column for the mere hut still too common throughout the country’.⁴ In some ways the situation was even worse than these figures suggest: the commissioners acknowledged that many of those living in first or second class houses had accommodation equating to the third or fourth class, due to insanitary conditions or

¹ Harriet Martineau, *Letters from Ireland* (London: John Chapman, 1852), 71.

² Asenath Nicholson, *Annals of the Famine in Ireland in 1847, 1848, and 1849* (New York: E. French, 1851), 22-3.

³ *Report of the Commissioners Appointed to Take the Census of Ireland, For the Year 1841* (Dublin: Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1843), xiv.

⁴ *Report of the Commissioners*, xiv.

overcrowding, and Robert Scally suggests the census walkers may have missed ‘a still lower order of habitation’ of ‘troglydyte dwellings’ described by contemporary travellers.⁵ And in some ways conditions were not so dire: Cormac Ó Gráda notes that cabins were often well-heated by turf, compensating for poor clothing, and peasants were frequently well-fed.⁶ The health and cheerfulness of the people was an eternal puzzle, and sometimes resented: in 1852 Martineau referred to ‘the undeserved healthiness of the ordinary Irish cabin’, its inhabitants ‘grovelling in filth, with a manure-heap on the threshold, a stagnant pool before the door, and rotten thatch dropping on the stale straw on which they sleep, and they nevertheless stout, clear-eyed, and ruddy’.⁷

By the 1851 census, 355,689 fourth-class houses (around 72%) had disappeared.⁸ Eerie stone remains haunted the landscape, a stark reminder of the people who had departed (fatally or otherwise) from them. For Martineau, unroofed cabins were ‘so painful – so even exasperating [...], that one wishes that a little more time and labour could be spared to level the walls, as well as take off the roof, when tenants are either ejected, or go away of their own accord’.⁹ The roofless cabins of Galway were to Anna Maria and Samuel Hall ‘like so many bleaching skeletons upon the barren moor, or the bleak hill-side, telling dismal stories of miseries inconceivable’.¹⁰ For James Mahony, artist for the *Illustrated London News*, for whom the cabins provided an evocative substitute for the dead he could not with decency sketch, they were ‘like the tombs of a departed race’,¹¹ aptly, given the ruins often concealed

⁵ Robert Scally, *The End of Hidden Ireland: Rebellion, Famine, and Emigration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 41-2.

⁶ Cormac Ó Gráda, ‘Poverty, population, and agriculture, 1801-45’, in W. E. Vaughan (ed.), *A New History of Ireland V: Ireland Under the Union, I: 1801-70* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 111.

⁷ Martineau, *Letters from Ireland*, 71-2.

⁸ *The Census of Ireland for the Year 1851: Part VI: General Report* (Dublin: Alexander Thom and Sons, 1856), xxiii.

⁹ Martineau, *Letters from Ireland*, 77.

¹⁰ Mr and Mrs S. C. Hall, *Hand-Books for Ireland: The West and Connamara* (London: Virtue, Hall, & Virtue, 1853), 41.

¹¹ James Mahony, *Illustrated London News*, Dec 15 1849 <https://viewsofthefamine.wordpress.com/illustrated-london-news/condition-of-ireland/> [accessed 16/4/17].

the remains of their owners. Sir Francis Head was so disturbed by the unroofed cabins of Mayo that he diverted his journey for an interview with the evicting Lord Lucan, but his sympathy was outweighed by his conviction that it was ‘the stern decree of Providence that civilization, sooner or later, should override and overrun those feeble tribes who are innocently revelling in what is usually called a state of Nature’; if the Irish ‘persisted in sleeping with their pigs and asses, and in subsisting with them on one single article of food’, they would inevitably be swept away.¹²

It is difficult to consider the miserable cabins described by travellers as the kind of ‘*felicitous space*’ Gaston Bachelard describes in *The Poetics of Space*, where ‘the house is one of the greatest powers of integration for the thoughts, memories and dreams of mankind’, but there are echoes of the attachment of the peasant to the cabin in Bachelard’s observation that ‘Without it, man would be a dispersed being. [...] It is the human being’s first world’.¹³ It is fair to surmise that the cabin and its contents meant something very different to their inhabitants than to census takers or ethnographers or philanthropists. John Barrow observed that in the rare cottage whose inhabitants ‘could boast of a solitary low wooden chair of rude construction’, ‘as if proud of their furniture, I was earnestly entreated to make use of it’.¹⁴ Barrow’s ‘as if’ negates the possibility of pride in such humble articles, yet the narrator of Anna Maria Hall’s short story ‘The Groves of Blarney’ says ‘I have witnessed the most touching instances of attachment to the literally *bare* walls of an Irish peasant’s dwelling on the part of its inhabitants’.¹⁵ She describes the agony of a man whose scanty furniture is being seized for rent at the loss of his kish, which had served as his children’s cradle as well as the basket from which his family ate their potatoes: ‘*it’s nothing but a kish*; it’s not worth

¹² Sir Francis B. Head, *A Fortnight in Ireland* (London: John Murray, 1852), 148-9.

¹³ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (1958), trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), xxxv, 6-7.

¹⁴ John Barrow, *Tour Round Ireland, Through The Sea-Coast Counties, in the Autumn of 1835* (London: John Murray, 1836), 152-3.

¹⁵ Anna Maria Hall, ‘The Groves of Blarney’, in *Lights and Shadows of Irish Life*, 3 vols. (London: Henry Colburn, 1838), I 132.

twopence to you – it's falling to pieces – but *it's more to me* than thousands; [...] *it's nothing but a kish* – but it's been with me full, and it's been with me empty, for many a long year, *and it's used to me – it knows my troubles* [...] don't take it - *it's nothing but a kish*'.¹⁶ The emotional and symbolic investment in the humble contents of a cabin co-exists with a keen and humiliating awareness of the inferiority of their possessions in the eyes of others. During the Famine travellers detected among cabin-dwellers symptoms of shame and attempts to make their homes more acceptable to visitors. A Dublin match-seller asked by Nicholson for directions to her house revealed that she had previously given a false address to others, 'for I was ashamed to be found in such a dreadful place, by a lady'.¹⁷ The Auxiliary Relief Committee of Friends at Cork recorded that the floors of the wretched cabins in Ballyvourney were as wet as parts of the road, and in one cabin 'the poor woman of the house considered it so unfit for our reception, that on our entering she threw a little dry straw before our feet for us to tread on'.¹⁸

In Famine literature, the progress of Famine and hollowing out of the characters' lives is marked by the diminishment and disappearance of even the humblest objects from their cabins. This chapter will begin with the realistic portrayal of fluid and fragile class hierarchies among cabin-dwellers, in well-known nineteenth-century Famine novels by William Carleton (a child of the cabin), Anthony Trollope (an Englishman who found himself – literally and metaphorically – in Ireland during the Famine, but distanced himself from the cabin), and Margaret Brew (a child of the Big House, born shortly after the Famine). In these novels, the mobility of characters frequently disrupts the fixed association of peasant and cabin, and emphasises gradations of poverty within the peasant class. The final part of the chapter will turn to the representation of Famine ruins in novels written or set in Celtic Tiger

¹⁶ Hall, 'The Groves of Blarney', I 133-4.

¹⁷ Nicholson, *Annals of the Famine*, 46-7.

¹⁸ *Transactions of the Central Relief Committee of the Society of Friends During the Famine in Ireland, in 1846 and 1847* (Dublin: Hodges and Smith, 1852), 173-4.

Ireland, for which the cabin serves as a *lieu de mémoire* connecting inequalities in the present to the legacies of the past.

William Carleton and the ‘humble home’

Carleton built his claims for authenticity on the fact he was a child of the cabin, but he was very particular about the kind of cabin he came from. When the Irish artist Henry MacManus was commissioned to sketch Carleton’s ‘humble home’ in the townland of Prillisk, near Clogher in Co. Tyrone, for a new edition of *Traits and Stories of the Irish Peasantry* (1843), Carleton objected that he ‘took the liberty of giving, from his own imagination, as vile-looking a hovel as ever sheltered a human being; and this he calls “Carleton’s Birthplace”’.¹⁹ MacManus’s sketch shows a simple small stone thatched cabin with signs of comfort and industry, not a million miles from Carleton’s description of it: ‘It was a long, low house with a kitchen as you enter, and two other rooms, one at each side of it’. However, Carleton experienced it as an insult, insisting that his cabin was ‘beyond doubt humble, but then it was unquestionably respectable’.²⁰

In stories such as ‘Larry McFarland’s Wake’ and *Paddy Go-Easy* (1845), Carleton urged his countrymen to reform their cabins and strive for ‘that reasonable condition of respectability, self-reliance, domestic comfort, and moral progress, which it is the duty of every Irishman and Irishwoman, no matter how humble their situation in the world may be, to endeavour to reach’.²¹ As Helen O’Connell points out, Carleton was heavily influenced by the improvement fiction of writers such as Hannah More and Mary Leadbeater,²² but the

¹⁹ William Carleton, *The Life of William Carleton: Being His Autobiography and Letters; and an Account of His Life and Writings, From the Point at Which the Autobiography Breaks Off*, by D. J. O’Donoghue, 2 vols. (London: Downey & Co., 1896), I 3-4.

²⁰ Carleton, *The Life of William Carleton*, I 4.

²¹ William Carleton, *Parra Sastha; or, The History of Paddy Go-Easy and His Wife Nancy* (Dublin: James Duffy, 1845), 19.

²² Helen O’Connell, *Ireland and the Fiction of Improvement* (Oxford: OUP, 2006), 18.

rhetoric of improvement was pervasive across political boundaries, and the desire for an improvement in the Irish cabin linked Carleton with the Young Irelanders too. Carleton's *Paddy Go-Easy* was written for the *Nation*'s Library of Ireland series, and *Valentine McClutchy, the Irish Agent* (1845) was originally written to be serialised in the *Nation*, but Thomas Davis felt it would have more impact as a volume. The *Nation* frequently invoked the cabin as a synecdoche for the state of Ireland. In the anonymous poem 'The Home of the Wretched', published in the *Nation* in April 1844, and introduced by the editor as 'a harsh, but certainly a strong and faithful picture', the cabin is nothing but 'a hole in the nook of the earth, / In a spot most dismal and drear', and a microcosm of the nation: 'Tis the home of our native race'.²³ In his essay 'The State of the Peasantry', Thomas Davis links the life of the Irish peasant indelibly to his cabin:

youth and manhood leave his roof rotten, his chimney one hole, his window another, his clothes rags [...] – his furniture, a pot, a table, a few hay chairs and rickety stools – his food, lumpers and water – his bedding, straw and a coverlet – his enemies, the landlord, the tax-gatherer, and the law – his consolation, the priest and his wife – his hope on earth, agitation – his hope hereafter, the Lord God!²⁴

Carleton was at odds with the politics of the Young Irelanders, but shared their hatred of evictions and unscrupulous agents and middlemen. Both combine the self-help rhetoric of improvement with the exposure of the forces that formed the homes of the poor.

Carleton's narratives offer a nuanced awareness of gradations of poverty, and the painful social decline of the industrious and respectable peasant. Frequently, the spaces we see his characters in are not those which have formed and defined them, but those they have subsequently been reduced to. There is a challenge to the assumed correspondence between

²³ 'The Home of the Wretched', *Nation*, April 6 1844, 8.

²⁴ Thomas Davis, 'The State of the Peasantry', in *Thomas Davis: Selections from his Prose and Poetry* (Dublin: The Talbot Press, n.d.), 194-7, at 195.

the cabin and the moral qualities of its inhabitants in *The Black Prophet* (1847), where the Daltons' descent from respectable independence to total penury is taken as confirmation of the father's guilt of murder:

Year after year, as they sank in the scale of poverty, did the almost forgotten murder assume a more prominent and distinct shape in the public mind, until at length it became too certain to be doubted, that the slow but sure finger of God's justice was laid upon them [...].²⁵

This is also correlative to the wider assumption that the Famine is a providential punishment for the nation's sins. However, Carleton makes clear that it is a terrestrial, not a supernatural, force working against them. The Daltons have been evicted from their 'extensive farm and respectable residence'²⁶ by the unscrupulous middle-man, Dick o' the Grange, who put their rent up when they made improvements. They are reduced to a 'low, damp, dark pestilential *kraal*, without chimney or window'.²⁷ Kraals, the huts of Central and Southern African villages, had been made familiar to British readers in travel books such as William Burchell's *Travels in the Interior of Southern Africa* (1822), and the *OED* cites George Downes's 'the poorest kraals of Ireland' in his *Letters From Continental Countries* (1832) as an example of the loose use of 'kraal' to mean a poor hut or hovel. The association of Irish cabins and African mud huts (or North American Indian wigwams) is common, and depending on its context either symptomatic of a tendency to define Irish poverty as tribal and cultural in origin, or to critique the failure of government policy in allowing such misery in close proximity to British wealth. The Daltons' 'kraal' contains hardly anything but a few pots, dishes, spoons and stools, and one bed. They have managed to salvage some of the furniture that signals their respectability, including an armchair which had been in the family for

²⁵ Carleton, *The Black Prophet*, 139.

²⁶ Carleton, *The Black Prophet*, 279-80.

²⁷ Carleton, *The Black Prophet*, 269-70.

generations, and an old clock, and the narrator notes their emotional attachment to ‘objects, otherwise of little value, to which we cling for the sake of those unforgotten affections and old mournful associations that invest indifferent things with a feeling of holiness and sorrow by which they are made sacred to the heart’.²⁸

The Daltons are not the only family to be descending. The cabin of the respectable and generous Sullivans, relatives of the presumed murder victim, also exhibits ‘all the marks and tokens of gradual decline’:

the dresser, though clean, had a cold, hungry, and unfurnished look; and what was unquestionably the worst symptom of all, the inside of the chimney-brace, where formerly the sides and flitches of deep, fat bacon, grey with salt, were arranged in goodly rows, now presented nothing but the bare and dust-covered hooks, from which they had depended in happier times.²⁹

Claudia Kinmonth describes the dresser as the pride of an Irish cottage, its doors often deliberately left ajar to display its contents, and ‘a dresser with poorly filled shelves was a sad sign of decline’.³⁰ The hooks which had once held bacon emphasise that the Sullivans had not been wholly restricted to potatoes. The cabin’s emptying reflects its inhabitants’ hunger: ‘the severe traces of poverty were as visible upon the inmates themselves as upon the house and its furniture’.³¹ By contrast, the house of the miser Darby Skinadre is neat and clean, with a prominently displayed delf crucifix and receptacle for holy water, but his food is carefully locked away in chests and hogsheads, and the dresser’s ‘cold-looking shelves, and those neglected utensils that in other families are mostly used for food’³² are symbols not of distress but meanness.

²⁸ Carleton, *The Black Prophet*, 144.

²⁹ Carleton, *The Black Prophet*, 33-4.

³⁰ Claudia Kinmonth, *Irish Rural Interiors in Art* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006), 49, 53.

³¹ Carleton, *The Black Prophet*, 33-4.

³² Carleton, *The Black Prophet*, 68-9.

The Black Prophet is set during the famine of 1817, but a chapter pointedly titled ‘A Picture for the Present’, first published in the *Dublin University Magazine* in December 1846, features a cabin discovery scene reflecting newspaper reports of whole families found dead or dying in cabins. The novel makes an immediate distinction between the cabin and its inhabitants; this is a ‘wretched and abandoned hut’, left by another family during a typhus epidemic, a shelter of last resort for a woman and her three children, who are discovered not by shocked strangers but locals, the priest and Nelly. The mother is the epitome of what David Lloyd describes as the ‘indigent sublime’:³³

Stripped, as she then was, of all that civilized society presents to a human being on the bed of death – without friends, aid of any kind, comfort, sympathy, or the consolations of religion – she might be truly said to have sunk to the mere condition of animal life.³⁴

Yet she clings to the last vestiges of her humanity; unable to breastfeed her baby, or comfort her dying son, she has nevertheless laid her dead daughter out with care, ‘evident from the decency with which the girl’s thin scanty covering was arranged’.

In Carleton’s *The Squanders of Castle Squander* (1852), the reduction of the human being to ‘animal life’ is linked directly to the loss of domestic comfort. While travellers like Martineau and Head consoled themselves that eviction would lead in the long run to improvement in material and moral well-being, for Carleton eviction – ‘our political engine of death’ – is an act of ‘sacrilege and murder combined’ which brings ‘domestic desolation’.³⁵ What most affects the narrator, Randy O’Rollick, himself a child of the cabin, is the domestic tenderness and affection of the evicted. He remembers the emotional

³³ David Lloyd, ‘The Indigent Sublime: Specters of Irish Hunger, in *Representations*, 92:1 (Fall 2005), 152-185.

³⁴ Carleton, *The Black Prophet*, 383-7.

³⁵ Carleton, *The Squanders of Castle Squander*, II 93-4.

attachment of the people to ‘those humble habitations in which they had spent their lives’, and projects forward to their future degradation:

[L]et us request the reader to pause over these ruined cottages, and ask himself the sum of human happiness which this spirit of extermination has destroyed. [...]

Humble as that wretched roof was, it protected them from at least the grosser assault of the elements. But now they are houseless; they have scarcely time or patience to think or to love each other as they did. The impulses of the heart, worn out by suffering and helplessness, become feeble, and by degrees the sacred instincts of affection are altogether dissolved, and the savage selfishness of necessity, and the terrible assaults of hunger separate their hearts – they sink beneath the brutes – become utterly degraded, and cease to feel at all for each other.³⁶

This is no improvement; it is the prelude to the death not just of the individual, but of civilisation itself.

Anthony Trollope’s ‘horrid sights’

Trollope had written to the *Examiner* during the Famine objecting that newspaper reports of bodies lying in heaps in the road, and cabins containing more dead than living bodies, were not facts, but ‘horrid novels’. Trollope denied that such sights were a daily occurrence; he had been travelling constantly in Ireland throughout the Famine, and had never seen ‘a dead body lying exposed in the open air’, or ‘a dead body within a cabin which had not been laid out in some sort of rough manner’. He admits, however, that ‘it may be said that if I did not enter cabins, I could not see the horrid sights which were to be met within’.³⁷ However, in his Famine novel *Castle Richmond* (1860), Trollope ensures that these ‘horrid sights’ are made

³⁶ Carleton, *The Squanders of Castle Squander*, II 233-5.

³⁷ Anthony Trollope, letter to the *Examiner*, April 6 1850, in Helen Garlinghouse King, ‘Trollope’s Letters to the Examiner’, *Princeton University Library Chronicle*, 26 (1965), 71-101, at 83.

visible. His Anglo-Irish protagonist, Herbert Fitzgerald, seeks shelter for himself and his horse in a small, wretched cabin at the roadside, not far from his father's estate; the narrator explains: 'In England no one would think of taking his steed into a poor man's cottage [...]; but people are more intimate with each other, and take greater liberties in Ireland'.³⁸ However, even in Ireland cross-class 'intimacy' requires formal customary gestures and reciprocal expectations that are lacking in the encounter. There is a woman in the cabin, but 'she did not attempt to move, nor show any of those symptoms of reverence which are habitual to the Irish when those of a higher rank enter their cabins'. Herbert is also confused by the lack of another social cue, a complaint from the woman which would lead naturally to a gesture of relief on his part, but she 'would not even raise her voice to ask for alms when he pitied her in her misery' – which he, and the narrator, take as a sign of her apathy and indifference to death. The interior of the cabin is almost empty:

There was no fire on the hearth, though a fire on the hearth is the easiest of all luxuries for an Irishman to acquire and the last which he is willing to lose. There was not an article of furniture in the whole place; neither chairs nor table, nor bed, nor dresser; there was there neither dish, nor cup, nor plate, nor even the iron pot in which all the cookery of the cottiers' ménage is usually carried on. [...] none of those articles of daily use which are usually to be found in the houses even of the poorest.³⁹

The space is haunted by the absence of those objects of little value which made life possible. Kinmonth notes that the hearth was 'the enduring symbol of Irish hospitality', or indeed of life itself, as 'in some homes it remained alight for generations'.⁴⁰ The lack of the ubiquitous iron pot emphasises the family's total destitution, as it suggests everything has been sold or pawned. It also underlines their starvation; when Herbert looks more closely he sees she has a

³⁸ Anthony Trollope, *Castle Richmond*, ed. Mary Hamer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 368.

³⁹ Trollope, *Castle Richmond*, 368-9.

⁴⁰ Kinmonth, *Irish Rural Interiors*, 7, 37.

small basin or bowl containing ‘a few grains of uncooked Indian corn-flour’ from a handful her husband had stolen from his workplace – ‘this was the food which had sustained her, or rather had not sustained her, since yesterday morning’.⁴¹ Worst of all, on a bundle of straw in a dark corner, Herbert finds the body of a four-year-old girl, ‘stripped of every vestige of clothing’.⁴² Herbert, therefore, sees what Trollope says he did not, ‘a dead body within a cabin which had not been laid out in some sort of rough manner’,⁴³ and the mother has sunk beneath the ‘animal life’ of the mother in *The Black Prophet*, who had shown respect to her dead. Herbert overcomes his disgust and lays out the body himself, straightening the limbs and closing the eyes, and covering her with his silk handkerchief. Chris Morash suggests ‘this simple act of compassion’ marks Herbert’s transformation into ‘a responsible subject’,⁴⁴ but his first action as a ‘responsible subject’ is futile: he orders a cart to be sent to take the woman and her child to the union workhouse, but it does not come in time: ‘People then did not think much of a dying woman, and were in no special hurry’.⁴⁵ The issue of responsibility is left unclear, as the narrator largely absolves the government of blame, and ends the novel with the assertion that the famine, pestilence, and exodus were ‘three wonderful events [which were] the blessings coming from Omniscience and Omnipotence by which the black clouds were driven from the Irish firmament’.⁴⁶ But the scene in the cabin is a haunting confirmation of what has had to be sacrificed for such progress, and the failure of even the well-intentioned to prevent it.

⁴¹ Trollope, *Castle Richmond*, 372-3.

⁴² Trollope, *Castle Richmond*, 371.

⁴³ Trollope, letter to the *Examiner*, April 6 1850, 83.

⁴⁴ Christopher Morash, *Writing the Irish Famine* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 44.

⁴⁵ Trollope, *Castle Richmond*, 374.

⁴⁶ Trollope, *Castle Richmond*, 489.

Margaret Brew's déjà-vu

In her preface to *The Chronicles of Castle Cloyne* (1885), Brew explains that she is telling ‘two different stories’, of the genteel Catholic Hyacinth Dillon of Castle Cloyne, and the strong farmer’s daughter Oonagh MacDermott, to show that the action of the Famine was ‘universal’, affecting ‘the home of the great, and the cabin of the lowly’ alike.⁴⁷ However, the novel inevitably demonstrates that the impact is not ‘alike’ in scale. The Dillons’ Castle Cloyne is sold to a London hotel-keeper, but regained at the end when Hyacinth strikes gold in California. Oonagh also retrieves her respectability at the end of the novel, but not before a sharp descent in status, from heiress of prosperous Ballycross Farm, full of comforts ‘no doubt of a very rude and primitive kind, but still of that kind that it is so pleasant to see’, where generations of Oonagh’s family ‘had drawn their first breath and breathed out their last sigh’, to servant, and finally to wandering pedlar.⁴⁸ Her cousin Susie Burke suffers a worse fate. Her family home, Bawnmore, is a comfortable farm, with a huge fire in the hearth, and directly opposite it ‘the tall dresser, the special pride and glory of the *Vanitee*’, displaying Mrs Burke’s ‘precious heirlooms’.⁴⁹ But a rash marriage and the Famine combine to reduce Susie and her husband to a desolate cabin, where they are discovered by Oonagh. The misery of the scene is underlined in the catalogue of contents:

There was an old table on three legs, a straw chair, a couple of stools made of twisted straw, a few of the most necessary kitchen utensils, and in a distant corner was a most wretched-looking bed, with an old chest that served the purpose of a table beside it. A couple of wooden “piggins,” and some few articles of the cheapest crockeryware,

⁴⁷ Margaret Brew, *The Chronicles of Castle Cloyne; or, Pictures of the Munster People*, 3 vols. (London: Chapman and Hall, 1885), I viii.

⁴⁸ Brew, *Castle Cloyne*, I 3, 1.

⁴⁹ Brew, *Castle Cloyne*, II 66-7.

completed the list of the furniture. [...] Oonagh had latterly seen a great many poor cabins, but none of them were half as bad as this most wretched place.⁵⁰

Susie Burke, ‘reared in comfort’, is now a ‘starved-out creature’, and her husband lies ‘dead – on a heap of rotten straw in that foul and darksome den!’ The horror of the cabin discovery scene is intensified by the fact it is a family member, who remembers what they once were, who finds the victims.

In a variation on this scene, Oonagh takes shelter in a hovel she initially thinks is a cattle shed. On entering she experiences *déjà vu*, remembering her discovery of her cousin: ‘It was the same thing over again’.⁵¹ But this is:

the most wretched place that was ever inhabited by human creatures. [...] There was no furniture whatever but one old table with only two legs, that was propped up against the mud wall by large stones, a small iron pot, and a *sugán* chair, on which the man who had spoken to her was sitting. As soon as he could see her he rose, and with the instinctive courtesy of the Irish peasant, pushed the chair towards her, and sat down again on an old turf-basket turned bottom upwards.⁵²

Oonagh recognises the man as Dick Considine; his wife Judy, Oonagh’s friend, lies dead on a bed of dirty straw. They had been evicted, and lost their child. Brew describes the Famine evictions as a scar on the memory, ‘so dreadful that no language can adequately describe its horror, and not so remote but that many still living can remember it well’.⁵³ But she attempts to be even-handed in her treatment of eviction, emphasising its horror and devastating effect for the peasantry, while absolving the landlords on the whole from responsibility. She admits ‘the miserable people, starved and naked, were driven from the poor cabins that were dear to them, for they represented *home*, either to beg, or enter the union workhouse’ where they

⁵⁰ Brew, *Castle Cloyne*, II 279.

⁵¹ Brew, *Castle Cloyne*, III 17.

⁵² Brew, *Castle Cloyne*, III 17-18.

⁵³ Brew, *Castle Cloyne*, II 164-5.

have ‘no relief to expect but in the awful peace of death, and no shelter but in an unhonoured pauper’s grave!’ Brew acknowledges that there were ‘cases of unnecessary harshness and abuse of power’ on the part of the landlords, but argues that ‘It was the imperative instinct of self-preservation; the instinct of one swimming for his life, who must perforce cast off with a determined hand the drowning comrade who clutches him with so convulsive a clasp that both are in danger of being drowned’.⁵⁴ Brew was herself the daughter of a Co. Clare landlord, and writing during the Land War; she dedicated her novel to Lady Florence Dixie, an outspoken critic of the Land League. Invoking the memory of the Famine in 1885 is dangerous, and Brew attempts to placate while conscientiously exposing and remembering the suffering of the peasantry. But recovery is uneven; having missed the worst of the Famine, and returned wealthy, Hyacinth Dillon buys back Castle Cloyne, but finds where the ‘snug farm-houses, and little hamlets’ once stood, there is ‘nothing now but heaps of stones and rubbish, tumbled about in unsightly, lonely ruin’.⁵⁵ While the novel bears the name of the castle which is restored, it also remembers the cabins which were not.

The ruined cabin as ‘topochron’

Emily Mark-Fitzgerald highlights the iconographic power of the Famine cottage both as a ‘residual presence’ of the Famine in the landscape, and a resonant figurative choice for Famine monuments, as in Eamonn O’Doherty’s *Famine Memorial* in Enniskillen and Brian Tolle’s *Irish Hunger Memorial* in New York.⁵⁶ For Kevin Whelan, Irish ruins are ‘topochrons – a single site that contains multiple times’ and capable of radical political redeployment.⁵⁷ Several recent Irish novels use the Famine cottage as a tangible spatial and

⁵⁴ Brew, *Castle Cloyne*, II 165-6.

⁵⁵ Brew, *Castle Cloyne*, III 191-2.

⁵⁶ Emily Mark-Fitzgerald, *Commemorating the Irish Famine: Memory and the Monument* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013).

⁵⁷ Kevin Whelan, ‘Reading the Ruins: the Presence of Absence in the Irish Landscape’, in Howard B. Clarke, Jacinta Prunty, and Mark Hennessy (eds), *Surveying Ireland’s Past: Multidisciplinary Essays in Honour of*

temporal link connecting the social and economic upheaval of the Famine to the excesses and consequences of the Celtic Tiger. Such novels typically feature what Robert Smart calls ‘cultural eclipse’, moments when ‘the immediate is suddenly eclipsed by those memories of the Famine which lay shrouded in silence for nearly a century.’⁵⁸

The inheritance of a Famine cottage allows for the exploration of legacy and intergenerational transmission of land and memory. In Seán Kenny’s *The Hungry Earth* (1995), the cottage is a literal portal, transporting the upwardly mobile Dublin accountant Turlough Walsh who inherits it back to 1846. Madness seems to be the fate of everyone who lives in this cottage, built on the site of a fever cabin. In a series of visits to this past, Turlough, who initially disdains the poor, assuming the people he encounters in 1840s Erris are modern-day squatters and ‘scavenging itinerants’, experiences Famine suffering, while in his present he educates himself about Famine history, setting himself up as an amateur historian so convinced that the Famine was an act of genocide that he publically challenges a feminist revisionist historian.⁵⁹ He is so changed by the experience that in his present he founds a local museum and raises awareness about the Famine, and in the past he sacrifices his life to provide money for two children to emigrate. Yet his reformation is undercut in several respects: he remains deeply obnoxious and aggressive; his adamant belief that the millions died and very few emigrated is undermined by the fate of the two children he saves, who go on to be wealthy Americans; his occupation of his uncle’s cottage has prevented a family of travellers – ‘these latter-day dispossessed’⁶⁰ – from buying it; and his assertion that all Catholics are the descendants of the dispossessed is nullified by his final discovery that his ancestor was a cannibal land-grabber. Rather than validating Turlough’s link to Famine

Anngret Simms (Dublin: Geography Publications, 2004), 297-328, at 320-1. Whelan inverts Bakhtin’s chronotope ‘to give it a spatial as opposed to a temporal inflection’ (327).

⁵⁸ Robert Smart, *Black Roads: The Famine in Irish Literature*, Famine Folios series (Hamden, CT: Ireland’s Great Hunger Museum), 28.

⁵⁹ Seán Kenny, *The Hungry Earth* (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1995), 56-8.

⁶⁰ Kenny, *The Hungry Earth*, 127.

victims, the cabin he inherits exposes the oppressions through which the modern excess he now regrets was made possible.

Carol Birch's *The Naming of Eliza Quinn* (2005) offers a more conventional multi-generational plot, in which two families are linked through a Famine cottage in Co. Kerry, inherited in 1969 by a wealthy New Yorker from her Irish grandmother. Used as a cow shed for twenty years, the cottage has no electricity or plumbing, and is surrounded by ruined cottages and 'the ghosts of old potato ridges'.⁶¹ Its name, Darby's Cottage, ties it to its owner in the 1840s, Darby Quinn, and to a series of injustices: its inheritor Beatrice's Vesey ancestors, neighbours of the Quinns, have engineered the transportation of Darby Quinn, hidden the body of his daughter in a hollow tree, where her skeleton will be found by Beatrice, and bought the land in 1848. The house is strongly marked by the presence of the Quinns; Beatrice feels 'as if all the people who ever lived in this house are somewhere absorbed into the walls, all in there looking out at me'.⁶² But the house's name is practically all that remains of them. In the local churchyard, there are lots of Veseys but no Quinns, and the only ones left locally are Luke Quinn, who works at the saw-mill, and his great-aunt Judith, who is in a nursing home whose name commemorates the landlord at the time of the Famine, Cloverhill. The Quinns' dispossession is also seen in the part of the novel set in 1900, when Tom Quinn is described by the Veseys as a 'bogtrotter' and 'tinker' with 'bad blood'. Beatrice discovers that her mother was the child of Lizzie Vesey and Tom Quinn, and she repeats the connection by conceiving a child in the cottage with Luke Quinn. The child is a symbol of renewal and reconciliation – Beatrice feels she 'brings the two sides together, like the ending of the Wars of the Roses'.⁶³ But significantly, the child will not be born or raised there. Beatrice returns to America, urging Luke to join them, and plans to rent the

⁶¹ Carol Birch, *The Naming of Eliza Quinn* (London: Virago, 2005), 7.

⁶² Birch, *The Naming of Eliza Quinn*, 11.

⁶³ Birch, *The Naming of Eliza Quinn*, 340.

cottage to ‘back-to-the-land’ types from Dublin, suggesting a reversion to a romanticised illusion, and a failure to deal adequately with the past symbolised by the cabin.

In an updated version of the cabin discovery scene, Tana French’s crime novel *The Likeness* (2008) features a victim, Lexie Madison, discovered stabbed to death in a strangely intact Famine cottage in Wicklow, the ‘rusty iron hook for the cooking-pot still hanging ready’.⁶⁴ Lexie had been living in the nearby Big House, Whitethorn House, with a group of Trinity PhD students whose origins seem significant: the Anglo-Irish Daniel, who inherited it from his uncle; Belfast-born Justin; inner-city Dubliner Abby; and Rafe, English-born son of an Irish merchant banker. The mysterious Lexie is marked out as probably not Irish, due to her fascination for the cottage: ‘Famine cottages are all over the countryside, we barely even see them any more. It’s only tourists – and mostly tourists from newer countries, America, Australia – who look at them long enough to feel their weight’.⁶⁵ The Famine cottage turns out to be a red herring. While the detectives initially focus on the animosity of local villagers culminating in a series of attacks on Whitethorn House, Lexie has not died because of the memory of eviction and landlord cruelty, but a much more modern grievance and anxiety about land and property. The village is dying, its young people moving to the big towns and cities for jobs. A property developer had wanted to buy Whitethorn House and turn it into a fancy hotel and golf course, which would have brought tourists and jobs and an opportunity for the village to be renewed. But this too is a red herring, inspiring the attacks on the house, but not on Lexie, whose death is related instead to the passionate desire of those in the Big House to create a space free of the capitalist, consumerist anxiety of life in Celtic Tiger Ireland. Daniel has given a share in the house to his friends, wanting to rescue them from the

⁶⁴ Tana French, *The Likeness* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2009), 22, 25.

⁶⁵ French, *The Likeness*, 92.

disenfranchisement of the modern mortgagee and renter, which he relates to historical dispossession:

The one crucial thing the British did was to claim the land as their own, to turn the Irish from owners into tenants. Once that was done, then everything else followed naturally: confiscation of crops, abuse of tenants, eviction, emigration, famine, the whole litany of wretchedness and serfdom, all inflicted casually and unstoppably because the dispossessed had no solid ground on which to stand and fight. I'm sure my own family was as guilty as any. There may well be an element of poetic justice in the fact that I found myself looking at the other side of the coin.⁶⁶

The Big House, the Famine cottage, and the village are all in this novel linked to economic imperatives, specifically property, that impact violently on human lives. French would go on to explore the ghost estate in *Broken Harbour* (2012), but in *The Likeness* she provides a historical dimension for the failure of the Celtic Tiger, which Fintan O'Toole argues was precipitated by 'nineteenth-century revenants, come back to haunt its dreams of twenty-first-century success'.⁶⁷

Anne Enright also juxtaposes the Celtic Tiger, property prices, and an encounter with a Famine cottage in *The Green Road* (2015). There are several Famine echoes in the novel, including overt allusions to Mangan's 'Dark Rosaleen' in the name of the mother, Rosaleen Madigan, and a comically excessive Christmas supermarket shop in which Constance buys every exotic delicacy available but forgets the potatoes, and imagines herself 'digging some out of a field [...]. Lifting her head to howl'.⁶⁸ The Madigan children are privileged but

⁶⁶ French, *The Likeness*, 503-4.

⁶⁷ Fintan O'Toole, *Ship of Fools: How Stupidity and Corruption Sank the Celtic Tiger* (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), 214.

⁶⁸ Anne Enright, *The Green Road* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2015), 232.

permanently dissatisfied, feeling like financial failures: ‘They had no money. And yet, and yet. They each struggled to remember this, they had enough’.⁶⁹

Towards the end of the novel, on Christmas Day 2005, Rosaleen is forced to take shelter in a Famine cottage, freezing and hallucinating, while her family search for her. Enright points out that Famine cottages are rare in the Burren landscape, because ‘the people were too poor, in this land of stones, to build stone houses: they lived in turf bothies instead’.⁷⁰ The Famine cottage is freighted with allegorical significance: an ancient space, with what Rosaleen imagines is a patch of hungry grass marking ‘the threshold of a house where all the people died, with no one left to bury them’,⁷¹ but also connected to the modern – through the empty roof, she sees a satellite. Rosaleen is about to become homeless, but voluntarily, selling the family home, Ardeevin, in an inflated property market.⁷² Given the genealogy of cabin discovery scenes, this one seems comic; a huge search is mobilised, and Rosaleen is rescued after a few hours, her son assuring her that friends and family are assembled in her kitchen with ‘buckets of coleslaw and left-over potato salad’, ‘real coffee’, and even ‘Bollinger’.⁷³ In the immediate aftermath, Rosaleen’s brush with mortality seems life-affirming, but at the next family crisis she reverts to selfishness. Ardeevin is bought by a developer, and as Mary McGlynn argues, ‘In setting the novel at the moment when Ardeevin can yield the greatest profits, Enright proclaims how little difference such a windfall makes’.⁷⁴ Enright writes that in the past she avoided “the landscape solution” in Irish prose, whereby the writer puts the word “Atlantic” or “bog” into the story and some essential

⁶⁹ Enright, *The Green Road*, 236.

⁷⁰ Anne Enright, ‘A return to the western shore: Anne Enright on yielding to the Irish tradition’, *The Guardian*, Saturday 9 May 2015 <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/may/09/return-western-shore-anne-enright-yielding-irish-tradition> [accessed 13/04/2017]

⁷¹ Enright, *The Green Road*, 278.

⁷² Enright, *The Green Road*, 236.

⁷³ Enright, *The Green Road*, 287-8.

⁷⁴ Mary McGlynn, “no difference between the different kinds of yesterday:” The Neoliberal Present in *The Green Road*, *The Devil I Know*, and *The Lives of Women*, *LIT: Literature Interpretation Theory*, 23:1 (2017), 34-54, at 46.

yearning in her character is fixed', but with *The Green Road* felt 'this was something I should allow myself to write about now'.⁷⁵ To invoke a Famine cottage as 'the landscape solution' in Celtic Tiger Ireland seems a satiric acknowledgment of a tendency to revert to the Famine and Irish victimhood, even when heavily insulated by the privilege of easily realised assets.

The cabin seems a perfect example of Pierre Nora's *lieux de mémoire*, which 'only exist because of their capacity for metamorphosis, an endless recycling of their meaning and an unpredictable proliferation of their ramifications'.⁷⁶ Early Famine novels complicate the straightforward association between the Irish and their living spaces often expressed in travel literature by emphasising the deterioration of the cabin and its contents due to the increasing poverty of the inhabitants, or a movement from basic but cherished homes to less salubrious shelters as a result of eviction. For later novelists, the Famine cabin, ruined but still starkly present, bears eloquent witness both to the disappearance of the most vulnerable class during the Famine, and the persistence of social inequality (real or imagined) linked to issues of housing in the midst of modernity.

⁷⁵ Enright, 'A return to the western shore'.

⁷⁶ Pierre Nora, 'Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire', *Representations*, 26 (Spring, 1989), 7-24, at 19.