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Narrating Sites of History: Workhouses and Famine Memory

Niamh Ann Kelly

Emblematic of a dark period in a troubled colonization, the workhouse is a dirty word in Irish history. Its system, buildings and sites comprise a challenging representational struggle between erasure and reconstruction in remembrance. Workhouses took years to build, employed thousands in the building process and subsequently housed hundreds of thousands from 1840s onwards and yet remain a quiet aspect of Famine Memory in visual and material culture.<sup>1</sup> The absence of extensively conserved workhouses is a consequence of life going on after the Famine, as some sites became utilized for different purposes and others succumbed to politically motivated destruction.<sup>2</sup> Workhouses have collective historical connotations beyond their strong literal connection to Famine-era pauperism. Though few of the buildings remain structurally intact at the start of the twenty-first century, workhouses remained a feature of Irish life for the poverty-stricken who found themselves alone in the world up to the mid-twentieth century and the 'poorhouse' was a dreaded destination. The buildings were emotive colonial signifiers in the post-Famine era shadowed by connotations of social deprivation, minimal comfort and untimely death. Consequently, by the 1930s, many workhouse sites were destroyed or damaged because they were deemed symbolic targets of civil unrest and political action, not dissimilar to attacks on the 'Big Houses' of descendants of the landed gentry.

There are no fully conserved or recreated sites inclusive of workhouse dormitories, dining halls and infirmaries in the country.<sup>3</sup> Written accounts of workhouses typically outline the rampant nature of illnesses in the workhouses, with matrons, clerks and physicians often succumbing to death along with inmates.<sup>4</sup> This essay focuses on heritage tourism and collective memory as interlinked concepts epitomized by narratives of modernity, where forged connections between history, visibility, voice, narrative and naming are enacted at two workhouse museum sites to make history readable: the Dunfanaghy Workhouse Heritage Centre in County Donegal and the Donaghmore Workhouse Museum in County Laois.

At Dunfanaghy and Donaghmore a complex collective past is capitulated through the naming of selected ordinary subjects of history. Conjuring collective remembrance at these sites thus negotiates a leap from narration of individuals' experiences to grappling with statistical information pertaining to a wider historic event that had extensive societal repercussions. Whether by means of personal stories or collective remembrance, it is issues of agency that most categorically manipulate the pressure and weight of a negative history.<sup>5</sup> Connectivity between spectatorship and voice are decisive in my reading, as at both sites the narrative representation of a woman or girl elucidates that her figure or identity presented through her Famine story cannot simply be regarded as her story, nor as only a local story. Each woman or girl's story represents a departure from silence, as un-speech becomes speech, but also delineates the depth,

breadth and nature of silences surrounding aspects of Famine remembrance. Such historical representation is contingent upon the established practices of cultural history generally and the nature of modernity named in an Irish context.

#### Names, Numbers and Narratives of Suffering

On the Clare County Council website is a list of deaths that occurred in the Kilrush Workhouse and its auxiliaries from 25 March 1850 to 25 March 1851 ("Return of Deaths in Kilrush Workhouse, from 25 March 1850 to 25 March 1851"). Scrolling through the alphabetical list, amounting to sixty-three pages of print with an average of twenty-six people listed per page, brings the magnitude of Famine devastation into view. The Kilrush list provides a brief account of every entrant: name, gender, age and cause of death, which usually followed within months of entering the workhouse. The online presentation of information on deaths speaks to a widely based present-day desire to consider the variety and scale of Famine experiences through access to details about ordinary, normally unnamed people affected by the Famine.

Colm Tóibín writes of the prohibitive imbalance of evidence in Famine histories, noting the "copious documentary evidence about public policy and the administration of relief (or, indeed, its withholding) generated by those in charge, and the paucity of personal material about those who suffered" (2004, 13), creating a problem for Famine historians, and by implication anyone seeking to represent the Famine through recourse to material and visual culture. Tóibín and Diarmaid Ferriter draw the conclusion that "no narrative now seems

capable of combining the sheer scale of the tragedy in all its emotion and catastrophe, the complex society which surrounded it and the high politics which governed it" (2004, 42). Their presentation in book form of a selection of documents relating to the Famine is designed to show the multifaceted and inherently contradictory nature of historical representation, complicated by what is left unsaid as much as by the innumerable ways in which what is iterated can be inferred.

Tóibín relies upon the device of naming as a way into his presentation of the Irish Famine. He begins his essay with a reference to Coole Park in County Galway, the house where W.B. Yeats often stayed when visiting the west of Ireland. Quoting Yeats' poem "Coole Park, 1929", he proceeds to discuss the estate's owner from 1880, Lady Augusta Gregory, by way of introducing Lady Augusta's husband, Sir William Gregory, who proposed the socially devastating Gregory Clause, or the Quarter Acre Clause.<sup>6</sup> Tóibín then draws attention to the restoration of a cathedral in Enniscorthy, County Wexford – Tóibín's hometown – designed by AWN Pugin and built during the Famine.

Catching the reader's attention with named standards of culture suggests that Tóibín is readily aware of the persuasive value of recognition. His naming of people most likely already known to the reader points equally to the absence of names for those who suffered most during the Famine. Considering both Yeats and Pugin offers a way into examining Famine history that connects to Terry Eagleton's comment: "[...] the modern period in Ireland flows from an

origin which is also an end, an abyss into which one quarter of the population disappears" (1995, 14). Yeats and Pugin are historicized in terms of their contributions to a modern Irish culture and so each differently reflects the heterogenous relationship between Ireland and Britain inscribing Anglo-Irish culture in the modern era. If, as in Eagleton's description, the Famine can be read as a temporal black hole in which one societal structure was slowly brutally replaced by another, Tóibín clarifies the point that the Famine, as event, comprises a sharp division in Irish history. He writes: "The cathedral is the beginning of real time: what happened before it is history" (1995, 27). Before the Famine, he implies, there were nameless masses; after it, celebrated poets and renowned architectural wonders.

From this "abyss" emerged a modern independent Ireland, contingent with modernity in a temporal sense and with it, endlessly polarizing processes of history as a strategy of naming. Between renown and infamy emerges another gap: a yawning cavern between famed creative individuals and anonymous suffering hordes. This is an engagement still played out, and in some cases redressed, in one of the most appellation-obsessed aspects of contemporary life: tourism. At the Dunfanaghy and Donaghmore workhouse museums the representational devise of narration negotiates the problems of naming and the contingent inadequacy of numerical accounts to configure a series of inquiries into how perspectives on a collective memory that is largely missing an archive in the conventional sense can be articulated at all.

The twinned concern of how numbers and names are utilized in collective memory arises in accounts of sustained atrocity in other historical and trans-geographical contexts. Naomi Mandel has written on instances of competitiveness arising between different culturally described injustices, focusing on the controversy surrounding Tony Morrison's use of the phrase "60 million and more" at the start of her novel Beloved.<sup>7</sup> This triggered debates over what the figure might imply: 6 million is a common figure for Holocaust deaths, while the figures on slavery are, essentially, so pervasive as to be hidden. Morrison reveals that she invoked the figure so that its reader would feel "snatched, yanked, thrown into an environment completely foreign [...] Snatched just as the slaves were from one place to another" and suggests "the work of language is to get out of the way" (Mandel 2002, 602).

Appearing to counter Morrison's claim of the usefulness of contemplating a numerical mass is Tóibín's remark on the indicative outcome of naming individuals in accounts of Famine: "Pondering the names makes you wonder about the whole enterprise of historical writing itself, how little it tells us, how brittle are the analyses of administrative systems in the face of what we can imagine for ourselves just by seeing a name with a fact beside it" (2004, 14).<sup>8</sup> Both Morrison and Tóibín are writers of fiction and so they eloquently make a convincing case, from different outsets, for imaginative realizations of history. While Morrison's appropriation of numbers creates a debate on what happens in attempts to statistically account for mass suffering, Tóibín is more

direct in assessing the potential of personal experience to convey historical instances.

The Kilrush web list exemplifies the breach between scale and specificity encountered by chroniclers and historians. Each individual's condition, though curt in content and presented in a tabulated electronic medium, remains separated as a negotiation of the space between the vast extent of Famine and the experience of those most affected. An unremittingly personal document, the webpage amasses to a community's depletion. Similarly indicative of broader experiences of the masses, individual accounts act as signifiers of the incalculable scale of history. To consider examples of this representational strategy in workhouse museums, therefore, some reflection on the evolution of the workhouse system and building and the volume and nature of statistical information is necessary as it provides the common context for promotions of individual stories in heritage tourism. As at both Dunfanaghy and Donaghmore emphasis is placed on Famine experiences of a girl or woman, I will also focus on the impact of the Famine on female populations in Donegal and Laois in particular.

#### Workhouses, Women and Micro-history

On 31 July 1838, an Act "for the more effectual Relief of the Destitute Poor in Ireland" became law (O'Connor 1995, 68). With this Poor Law Commissioners for England and Wales gained authority to appoint Assistant Commissioners for Ireland. A poor rate was levied to enact the decisions of that Commission and emigration assistance was to be provided to those who met

certain criteria evaluated at a local level.<sup>9</sup> Ireland was divided into 120 Unions and a total of 130 workhouses were to be built. By 1843, 112 workhouses were complete and the rest nearing completion (O'Connor 1995, 89). The later increase in unions to 130 was a result of the Poor Law Amendment (Ireland) Act of June 1847 (Jackson 1999, 75).

English architect George Wilkinson designed the prototype workhouse complex. He modelled his generic design directly on workhouses he had built in Wales and England, and the Irish ones were similarly functional in plan. The layout was largely repeated throughout the country, though a few sites were adapted from other uses.<sup>10</sup> Wilkinson's site plan echoed standard practices within prison and hospital design, where panoptical notions of visual power are key to strategies of surveillance and subjugation. The buildings usually had four distinctive court-yarded areas. The entrance building was typically separated from the rest and was where inmates were formally admitted, washed down and had their own clothing taken away.<sup>11</sup> Behind this, the main part of the building contained the accommodation for inmates and matrons. Beyond this central area the dining hall was situated, with kitchens and washhouses at either side. The back end of the dining hall typically led to the infirmary. Later, fever houses were added in separate buildings, in recognition of the contagious nature of some illnesses at this time.

The majority of Irish workhouses were intended to house in the region of 600-800 inmates. The workhouse design and system was fundamentally designed to repel. Though admission

to the workhouses was strictly by family, on entering the workhouse women, men, girls, boys and infants were all separated, which effectively broke up family units internally (McLean 2004, 59).<sup>12</sup> Sleeping conditions were basic and cramped even when not overcrowded. Added to this, the diet of Indian meal had poor nutritional value as it was often inadequately cooked and compounded inmates' vulnerability to illness. Within the workhouse, labour was officially promoted as a means for inmates to earn their keep and generally encourage good character.<sup>13</sup> For men, this usually meant grinding corn by turning enormous capstan mills, breaking stones or working on workhouse land, while women did needlework, cleaning, general household chores and took care of the infirm inmates (Kissane 1995, 98). Many unions took loans from the British Government to build the workhouses and the repayments were difficult during the economic crisis of the Famine, leading to administrative problems, which resulted in even more basic conditions.<sup>14</sup> By the summer of 1846, many workhouses were only half-full but by winter of that year most in Connaught and Munster were over-populated by hundreds, while Commissioners turned away hundreds more seeking shelter.

Of the 130 workhouses established, nineteen were in Connaught, thirty-six in Leinster, thirty-two in Munster and forty-three in Ulster (O'Connor 1995, 80). By the end of 1849 the capacity of occupancy in workhouses was for over 250,000 inmates at any given time (Kissane 1995, 89). In a table and map outlining population decline in Ireland between 1846 and 1851 (172-173), Connaught and Munster (both largely rural) are

presented as significantly affected by annual rates of excess mortality and general population decline.<sup>15</sup> These figures imply, in one reading, the success of the workhouse system and related supports as, proportionate to each local population, there were fewer Famine-related deaths in provinces with more workhouses. Another way of reading this statistic, however, suggests the imbalance in representational support by the workhouse system in poorer provinces meant that these populations were destined to die in larger ratios precipitated by the collapse of a fragile socio-economic agri-dependent system with the Famine. From these alternative readings it is apparent that statistics have an unstable, though affective, impact on recounting the scale of disaster.

How the Famine affected females specifically is debatable. The statistical account of male to female population ratios in 1841 and in 1851 show that overall ratios remained the same in each the counties of Donegal and Laois (Kennedy et al. 1999, 46), though at a national level the male population proportionately declined. Laois saw more of the younger male population survive than the female from 1841 to 1851, and there was also a relative increase in the ratios of the older population of males to females. These comparisons suggest that females of younger and older age were affected by Famine conditions more than males were, while early middle-aged women survived relatively well. In Donegal greater numbers of older women survived than older men, while the younger populations broadly suffered or survived in equal proportion (Kennedy et. al. 1999, 48-49). The overall relative

male decline in population has often been presented as significantly defined by emigration. The uncertainty over how many died on emigrant journeys or soon after arrival in other countries is important missing information. Though women appear to have survived the Famine in greater ratios than men, these figures do not account for deaths among emigrants, which throws statistics of survival into question (Kennedy et. al. 1999, 40-41). Furthermore, the numbers do not account for quality of life, as the nature of survival was widely divergent.

Literacy is another, perhaps more distinct, matter. Both Donegal and Laois had higher illiteracy among women both before and after the Famine compared to men. However, literacy improved nationwide after the Famine (Kennedy et. al. 1999, 98-99). As in the double reading of locations of workhouses, this may suggest that the less literate people were, the more they were affected by the Famine. This generates an intriguing context for considering the issue of voice in representations of the Famine in heritage tourism realised through the narration of stories about women or girls, as at Dunfanaghy and Donaghmore.

It is unsurprising, then, that in representations of a history such as the Famine, where sources are riddled with uneven emphases, numbers might be supplanted by personal narration. In light of Natalie Zemon Davis's work, historical focus on an individual life (as opposed to the production of exhaustive biography) is a probable means to "an opening toward the society around him or her" (2010, 74). Individuals'

stories become indicative of, or stand in for, the social circumstance in which they are situated. However, Pierre Nora warns that interest in the individual lives of ordinary people is, ultimately, an inherently contradictory strategy of historical remembrance: "From countless 'microhistories' we take shards of the past and try to glue them together, in the hope that the history we reconstruct might seem more like the history we experience. One might try to sum all this up by coining a term like 'mirror-memory', but the problem is that mirrors reflect only identical copies of ourselves, whereas what we seek in history is difference – and, through difference, a sudden revelation of our elusive identity. We seek not our origins but a way of figuring out what we are from what we are no longer" (1996b, 13).

Nora also describes this wider collective interest as a desire to slow down time, which simultaneously implies a rejection of statistical history: "[. . .] we read biographies of ordinary people as if to say that the "masses" can never be understood simply by, as it were, measuring their mass (1996b, 13). Such representations of the past then can potentially conform, in Nora's thesis, to a performed nostalgic positivism; a sense of time mediated through indicative places, stories and objects.

A resistance to enumerate mass suffering and death in the web-based Kilrush list forces its reader to consider information in terms of individual life experiences, while still remaining aware of the length of the list. As an expression of the depth of both individual experiences and the

breadth of the Famine's impact, the Kilrush list utilizes its dispensation of selectivity to posit speech and silence as equally active forces of both suppression and revelation: limited personal details appear, while the cumulative number is less easily arrived at. Alongside Nora's implication that over-identification with the "shards" of the past produces an inadequate reflection of history's function in the present day, it is also necessary to question if, to readers of the past, differentiation alone demonstrates historical change.

#### Utterances of History at Dunfanaghy and Donaghmore

Situated on the outskirts of the small town of Dunfanaghy, the Dunfanaghy Workhouse Heritage Centre (opened in 1995) is billed as a Famine museum by roadside signage. The centre is mostly concerned with the story of "Wee Hannah" (Hannah Herrity) and information on workhouse life and Famine conditions more generally. There is also a display about a local lake, a crafts centre, shop, art gallery and café on the same site. The exhibition center is located in part of the original nineteenth-century workhouse, the rest of which was demolished (fig.1).

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The first floor of the small museum is developed around a series of inanimate tableau presentations depicting key episodes in Hannah's life. Mannequins are arranged in different settings to provide contemporary context for the time period depicted. On sale at the shop is a booklet of Hannah's story, narrated in the first person.<sup>16</sup> The promotional

leaflet for the center describes her historical usefulness as an indicator of rural life in nineteenth-century Ireland: "See and hear 'Wee Hannah' tell the true story of her long life. 'Wee Hannah' talks of her harsh upbringing on a farm in the 1830's, her time in the Dunfanaghy Workhouse and eventually a more peaceful old age".

The first tableau area introduces Hannah as a young girl during Famine times (fig. 2). She sits alone in front of a traditional fireplace and behind her are two traditional weave baskets. One contains turf, the other rotting potatoes. In this material introduction to Hannah the museum designates her life as a story pertaining to the Famine.

Insert image here

Throughout the exhibition, when the visitor enters a presentation area and presses a red wall button, the area lights up and an audio plays with a voiceover relating the story of each tableau and enlivening the frozen sequences on display. In one depiction, for example, the visitor meets Hannah surrounded by her sick and dying family, while in another a doctor visits her and her young siblings. Her mother died in childbirth during the Famine and Hannah left home shortly after. She then spent time in a local hospital and in Dunfanaghy workhouse and subsequently became a travelling woman, enduring a tough, impoverished life. In a later tableau, Hannah is shown as an adult in her own home, which she acquired shortly before her death.

At first walk-through the Famine may seem peripheral to Hannah's life, a mere side-story of her youth, but her status



as Famine survivor was pivotal in shaping the quality and direction of her life. Because of the historical timing and geographical location of her childhood, Hannah spent formative parts of her young adulthood in institutional care and in her later adult life was socially dependent. In the ground floor display areas, panels provide information on Famine statistics and facts and give details of workhouse life and diets (fig. 3). These rooms contextualize Hannah's life in the light of the wider societal impact of Famine relief institutions.

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Conventions of dioramic presentation are marked in the tableaux, framing the representations within the parameters of a colonially described mediation of cultural identity. Henrietta Riegel comments that "museum exhibits can [...] be considered as very public forms of ethnography. Some of the critiques of museums stem from the fact that they control, interpret and impose classifications onto other people's history" (2004, 89). This has been symptomatic of a modernist museological practice of visualizing otherness through staging how people different from the viewer (in time or geography) lived. Such presentations exemplify the power relations of western ethnographic typographies and representational practices as associated with imperialisms of vision.<sup>17</sup> Therefore in the writing of ethnography, such as exhibition display, there is a "relationship between the construction of cultural difference and ethnographic distance" (88). This difference is comparable to a separation through time,

performed and visualised in material culture, sought by the reader of history of Nora's description.

Applying Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's concept "in situ", Hannah functions as an object that "is a part that stands in a contiguous relation to an absent whole that may or may not be re-created" (1998, 19). In relation to the general Famine information, Hannah is equally an object "in context", placed in "a theoretical frame of reference" (21). However, at Dunfanaghy the subject of the tableaux is not only named, situated and contextualized but also speaks, which might imply that she is somehow nearer to the visitor than an unnamed and silent subject. At Dunfanaghy it is time that creates the primary tunnel of imperial vision, positioning Hannah as both in situ and in context, and formulates a newer colonization of its subject by historical distancing. The conundrum of historical representation's relationship to the reader, which Nora alludes to as the shards of a broken mirror that fail to give a full reflection of the identity-seeking self, is interrogated in the presentation of Hannah's life through experiential time.

Addressing a burgeoning desire in heritage and museum practices for personal witnessing, in the here-and-now, of an elsewhere or past that can only remain distant, devices used to make other places or the past seem more immediate actually highlight the inaccessibility of history.<sup>18</sup> At Dunfanaghy, the mannequins, temporary audio and lighting up of the tableaux and even the book accentuate how removed the visitor is from the past. While Hannah may be a figure identifiable with the

past of Irish people visiting the centre, a more convincing difference between Hannah and any visitor dominates the museum. Beyond Nora's assertion of making visible how much the visitor has changed since then (the time of history – also a notion of difference), it is the power of speech which, perhaps inadvertently, acts as the clearest device of identity differentiation at Dunfanaghy. The observational quality of passing through Hannah's life and the necessity of a visitor's presence to illuminate the staged scenes of her life and activate her enacted audio story are powerful reminders that the voice of history relies entirely on being asked to speak. By Joan W. Scott's description, "[i]t is not individuals who have experience but subjects who are constituted through experience" (1991, 779).<sup>19</sup> Not only at a distance in time, Hannah is forcibly a subject of historical perspective, speaking only when a visitor chooses to place her, as a constructed subject, in their line of vision and hearing, or open the pages of her engrossing life-story.

The issue of who gets to speak is addressed differently at the Donaghmore Workhouse and Agricultural Museum (opened in 1993) in Laois (fig. 4). The abbreviated and moving tale of Margaret Fitzgerald is one of the key ways in which this museum utilizes personal narrative as one aspect of its wider representations. Located in rural Laois, the museum's aim is to represent roots, causes and outcomes of the workhouse system in Ireland and also displays a collection of agricultural artefacts in one of the workhouse buildings. The museum website highlights that: "[o]ne of the five buildings

of the Workhouse Museum is restored to its previous state and stands empty with its white washed walls reflecting the bleak stories of life 150 years ago in the Workhouse" (<http://www.donaghmoremuseum.com/index.html>).<sup>20</sup>

Insert image here

Thomas Blom notes that media (global) usually provides the first impressions of a place or region (local) (2000, 30). In light of this, the emphasis on the Donaghmore website is cause for thought. Highlighted on the website is the story of a young woman's fraught time at the workhouse. Online, a transcribed series of dated entries from a report book recounts how Margaret was refused the right to emigrate following her entry to the workhouse. From there, after a violent aggression, she was sent to jail. On her release from jail she sought refuge in the same workhouse, was refused entry, and again became violent, which led to further prosecution. If global media shapes perceptions of what is yet to be physically encountered, the web transcription of the selected facts on Margaret positions her story (and any others that might be added) as pivotal to the museum's representation of workhouse life.

On the ground floor in the main museum building, a former schoolroom for boys houses a small exhibition area of panels with general information on the workhouse system in Ireland and specific details on the history of the Donaghmore Workhouse. Throughout the building, other rooms have brief panels on workhouses and upstairs one room contains furniture,

including a bed with a mannequin in it, demonstrating what the matron's room would have been like. Across the small landing area are dormitories, left bare (fig. 5). A guide is required to open up the spaces and switch on an audio that plays through the rooms and provides an account of the site and workhouse life.

Insert image here

In the schoolroom exhibition area, one of a number of free-standing panels provides information on four different people involved with the workhouse, one of whom is Margaret (fig. 6).<sup>21</sup> Her story stutters incomplete and the panel details only cover a brief period, from September 1859 to July 1860. However, an audio played through speakers in the room informs the listener that she may have "been framed" for "pushing Miss Bergin down the stairs". Elsewhere in the room the visitor reads that Miss Anne Bergin was a teacher at the workhouse. In the other restored workhouse building, in the Agricultural Exhibition rooms, a newspaper article is displayed which recounts a 2006 Halloween pageant performed by the local community at the workhouse museum. This text suggests that Margaret was eventually sent to Van Diemen's Land (now Tasmania, Australia) where Irish (and British generally) convicts were sent in the nineteenth-century (*The Leinster Express*, 8 November 2006).<sup>22</sup>

Insert image here

As with Hannah's story, this timeframe of post-Famine adulthood points to the social consequences of life in the workhouse after the Famine. Counter to Hannah's story, the

museum visitor at Donaghmore is left with a largely censored life-story from the past, as only a glimpse of Margaret's troubled engagement with the workhouse system is revealed. Furthermore, she is not the narrator of her story, which appropriately echoes her disempowered status during her life. In another context, Irene Kacandes proposes that narrative indirectness can convey the subject's own lack of access, as well as the text's, to her psyche, implying that the loss of voice can be meaningfully deployed in telling a story (1999, 63), as it is at Donaghmore. The contrast between Hannah's first-person narrative and reading about Margaret in the third person denotes a marginal difference in power over the direction of their lives.

The veracity of either Hannah's or Margaret's story is questionable in a strict sense: Hannah's because of its retrospective framing and Margaret's due to its lack of clear closure. Ann Rigney remarks that the process of remembering is not always aligned to truth about the past: "[. . .] certain things are remembered [. . .] because they are somehow meaningful in the present", rather than "authentic" (2004, 381). Due to a lack of fuller accounts from workhouse occupants, the representations of these two personal narratives indicate the function of imagination at play in heritage tourism. More specifically, Famine memory at Dunfanaghy and Donaghmore is constructed across notions of local, national and global cultures enacted by two representational strategies. Firstly, in the context of remembering the Famine, the survival stories of Hannah and of

Margaret insist that the local and national event being remembered had consequences beyond its usual historically defined duration.<sup>23</sup> Secondly, both museums place indicative emphasis on a girl or woman. As protagonists in Famine history, the testimonies of Hannah and about Margaret are placed within the internationally recognized format of a potentially vulnerable but remarkably articulate or lively girl or woman.

In relation to the narrator/protagonist as survivor, at Dunfanaghy, the hardiness of Hannah is suggested as key to her survival: she is presented as a spirited and determined person ("[...] who impressed all who met her", Dunfanaghy Workhouse, 3). However, though Hannah survived the Famine as a young girl and lived until the age of either eighty-nine or ninety, a very good age for that period, she did not live well. Achieving little personal independence in her latter years, she worked extremely hard in service of one kind or another for most of her life. Though the museum and book suggest her indomitable character aided her survival, the genetic luck of a healthy constitution was perhaps significant. As a depiction of an economically deprived life, the story of Hannah effectively eschews simplified celebratory accounts of survival. At Donaghmore, the morsel of Margaret's story the visitor can piece together regards only her discipline and results in an even less palatable notion of survival in historical representation. The outcome of Margaret's life is undisclosed in the museum panel and she is not directly illustrated by image or mannequin. As a protagonist of a local

Famine history her lack of voice is underscored by the clinical representation of a truncated narrative, accentuating, upon comparison, the unusually full evidence suggested by Hannah's representation at Dunfanaghy.

Visitors to both sites are effectively encouraged to consider a sustained account of the Famine and are provided with an alternative route for negotiating past destitution of this period than more typically presented, for example, through representations focusing on the two-pronged option of either death or emigration. More widely, Famine memory is conspicuous as a set of narratives both fragmented and about fragmentation: dispossession of personal control, splitting of families and disruption of communities. Acknowledging Famine experiences as a collection of many stories, Hannah's long harsh life and the undisclosed outcome of Margaret's embody aspects of the qualitatively protracted and socially fracturing impact of the Famine.

As shaped subjects of history, Hannah and Margaret are also critically implicit in a global representational strategy in which a girl or woman is the primary focus of a personal story told to address a wider negative history. This emphasis on female gender relates both museum stories to a hugely successful international profile of testimony, epitomized by Anne Frank, which is replete with implications of innocence and potential vulnerability. It is remarkable that personalized experiences are emphasized in these workhouse representations when, as a system of institutionalized relief that sought to deal with masses, entering a workhouse resulted

in the separation of genders, a dehumanizing rotation of feeding and the allocation of work through an absolute loss of personal agency. By means of their representations in exhibition settings Margaret and Hannah are each elevated to what Davis describes as "privileged witnesses to her time" (2010, 74). Unlike Davis's subjects who are often extraordinary for their historical context and generally highly outgoing, even "self-fashioning" to borrow Davis' term, Hannah and Margaret are privileged witnesses precisely by way of their narrative function as reflections on the mundaneness of disempowerment. Their stories not only iterate tales of poverty: they point usefully to wider histories of bureaucracy, micro-governance and everyday life in nineteenth-century Ireland.

The difficulty of engaging with silence or lack of speech is articulated by two unlikely, probably illiterate, women speaking from the past.<sup>24</sup> Margaret Kelleher refers to the potential for discussions on the inexpressible to become a rhetorical tool (1997, 4), and Mandel advises on the limits of reiterating paradoxes of language and silence (2002, 608). Instead of a directionless reiteration of the difficulty of iteration, the focus on two women at Dunfanaghy and Donaghmore indicates a path of useful representation, transcending victim-narratives to conflate issues of representational agency, historical visibility and literacy. Though neither woman was in a position to be heard during in her lifetime (Hannah was near the end of her life when the interviews took place) the reach of their stories through time gives

fractional voice to a section of Irish society struggling for basic literacy and quality of life within a socio-economic descriptor which rendered them susceptible to the worst of Famine conditions.

The utterances of history occurring at Dunfanaghy and Donaghmore are co-existent to the nation as a definitively modern conceptual entity ritualized through naming. The challenge of defining collective memory as a discreet manifestation of community is addressed through pronouncements of individual life where the single female is rendered as a stand in for the experiences of many. The voices of Hannah and of Margaret's reporting officer do not allow for dialogue and firmly place the past at a distance, while also promoting awareness of how the present creates the subjects of history. In this mix, concerns of localism, nationalism and globalism interact and constructions of collective identity are only geographically oriented but temporally inclined also. Critically, the centrality of voice in accessing history is stressed and the paradoxical disparity of who usually gets to be heard in negative history is momentarily remedied in related but differentiated paradigms at each site: a far, and purposeful if interdependent, cry from the reverberations of Pugin, Yeats and Lady Augusta.

#### Notes

1. Over 11,000 men across Ireland were employed at any one time on the building project as they were all built simultaneously (O'Connor 1995, 90). During the height of the Famine,

workhouses featured as sites of popular protest and were depicted in related news print illustrations:

Demonstrations outside the workhouses – institutions that were a visible and countrywide symbol of poverty – also became a common way of protesting at the inadequacy and inefficiency of the relief provision (Kinealy 2002, 127).

2. Since Irish Independence remaining workhouse sites have mostly become county homes, district hospitals or county hospitals.
3. Commemorating such places, and their records, is now reliant on local tourist information concerns and the aleatory interventionist enthusiasm of local historians or interested individuals or groups. There are abstracted representations such in the Famine rooms at the Johnstown Irish Agricultural Museum and Famine Exhibitions, County Wexford, where the 'Entrance Door to Callan (Co. Kilkenny) Workhouse' is presented as an altered artefact among others in an exhibition setting.
4. For example, the Ballinrobe Workhouse was described in these terms in an article in *The Mayo Constitution*, on 23<sup>rd</sup> March, 1847 (Mayo County Library 2004, 81-82).
5. As noted by Claire Hackett and Bill Rolston "[...] storytelling is far from simple, uncomplicated and non-contentious" (2009, 372). Their study of the use of storytelling for victims of political violence in Northern Ireland traces the tensions, problems and potentials between "unofficial" and "official" strategies in particular. Mark Reinhardt, in his exploration of the story of Margaret Garner, on whom Tony Morrison's novel, *Beloved* is based, asks the difficult question: "What

constitutes a responsible telling?" (2002, 117). For him, the idioms of silence and ventriloquism ultimately highlight the contradiction of wanting to bear witness and make possible testimony (119). These concerns underpin my consideration of agency – retrospectively endowed, where denied in the past.

6. From 1847, the Quarter Acre Law implemented a £4 Rating Clause which meant landlords were responsible for holdings under £4, while the Gregory Quarter Acre clause decreed that there was no relief for a cottier who held more than a quarter acre.
7. First published in 1987, the novel is derived from the story of a particular slave, Margaret Garner. Reinhardt initially describes Garner, who is also the subject of his work (2002), as  

[...] a woman, who, in 1856, found herself at the centre of one of the most symbolically charged and widely discussed of all fugitive slave cases. Garner's notoriety at the time was due to an act she committed at the moment of capture – she killed one of her children. (83)
8. The names he refers to are in a quotation from *The Famine Decade: Contemporary Accounts, 1841-1851* (edited by John Killen), where a number of people are named as dying from hunger and, for some, details are given of where they were found dead.
9. Emigration assistance was one shilling per pound of the poor rate (O'Connor 1995, 68), if the individual was granted the right to emigrate by the local Commission. Ó Murchadha: "With the passing of the 1838 Act, the word 'pauper' entered currency in Ireland, acquiring connotations of institutional dependency, effective loss of citizenship and human dignity" (2011, 24).

Dissuasive practices such as the notorious 'workhouse test' linked outdoor relief to indoor relief measures ostensibly as a means to ensuring only the truly needy received access to workhouse places, but in effect led to the loss of outdoor relief for many who needed it but refused accommodation in workhouses, usually out of fear of the likelihood contagion and death.

10. The Poor Law Commission briefed Wilkinson that the workhouses were to be cheaply built and decoration excluded (Ó Murchadha 2011, 25). All but five were new buildings (Kissane 1995: 92).
11. This procedure was described in 2009 by a museum guide at Donaghmore Workhouse & Agricultural Museum.
12. "[...] children over the age of two were separated from their parents, and saw them afterwards only at very restricted intervals" (Ó Murchadha 2011, 24).
13. Foynes notes that an official reading of the Poor Rate was that it would benefit the poor sections of society. He quotes Trevelyan:

The necessity of self-preservation and the knowledge that rents can be saved from the encroachments of poor-rates, only in proportion as the poor are cared for and profitably employed, will secure a fair average good conduct on the part of the landed proprietors, as in England, and more favourable circumstances will induce improved habits. (2004, 73)

14. Donnelly notes:

[T]he 130 poor law unions into which Ireland was divided were each self-contained raisers and spenders of their

own tax revenue; the poorest unions in the country had to go it alone, even though their ratepayers might well sink under the accumulating weight of the levies needed to support a growing mass of pauperism (2001, 22).

Kissane writes that the workhouse was viewed as a place of absolute last resort when, following a fever epidemic, the average weekly mortality rates in the workhouses rose in a matter of months from four per thousand in October 1846 to twenty-five per thousand by April 1847 (1995, 89). Ó Murchadha notes:

Exterior appearance and internal conditions soon engendered a loathing so deep for the workhouses among the people that even in the harshest periods leading up to 1845, nowhere were the more than half full; resorted to chiefly by those already socially outcast, professional beggars and street prostitutes. (2011, 25)

Also:

The evidence for persons consciously opting to die rather than accept workhouse places is plentiful, and in many investigations, especially inquests, we are given the exact words uttered by dying persons to his effect, as told to neighbours, priests or Poor Law officials. (104)

15. The table is reproduced from Joel Mokyr 's *Why Ireland Starved: a Quantitative and Analytical History of the Irish economy, 1800-1850* (1983) and the map from Dudley Edwards and T. Desmond Williams' *The Great Famine: studies in Irish History, 1845-52* (1956). According to Kissane, prior to the Famine the

population was increasing, and that due to Famine emigration and conditions in Ireland, the fall in birth rate can be read as a constituent of population decline (1995, 172).

16. The booklet, *The Story of 'Wee Hannah': a Waif of the Famine, as told to her benefactor Mrs. Law*, is made up in the main of a series of long quotations from an interview Law undertook before Hannah died (Dunfanaghy Workhouse). Hugh Law, an MP, built a one-roomed house for Hannah where she died. Hannah was born in either 1835 or 36, and died in 1926. The Heritage Centre was opened to the public in 1995, website:  
<http://www.dunfanaghyworkhouse.ie/>.
17. Both live shows and artificially arrested or created tableaux equate seeing or witnessing with understanding. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett alludes to this when she describes early museums as "surrogate theatres" (1998, 34). She also mentions the panoptical aspect:  

the chance to see without being seen, to penetrate interior recesses, to violate intimacy [...] in its more benign mode, the panoptic takes the form of hospitality [...] The issue is the power to open up sight differentially, to show with respect to others what one would not reveal about oneself – one's body, person and life" (55).

The presentations at Dunfanaghy primarily fluctuate between these two modes of panoptical display.
18. The increased use of simulation technologies, at science and natural histories museums for example, are indicative of this trend from spectacle to participation in exhibition practices.

19. Scott writes specifically on homosexuality, but her account of subject, difference and history is useful in my discussion on retrospective views of otherness. At time of writing, the Dunafaghy Heritage Centre was developing the use of headphones and multi-lingual voice-overs for the displays also.
20. The museum opened to the public 1993. Further information on Donaghmore Workhouse and Agricultural Museum website:  
<http://www.donaghmoremuseum.com/index.html>. Accessed 22 December 2011. The 5 original workhouse buildings on the site date from 1853 and the site was opened on foot of amendments made to the poor law in 1850, which saw the building of extra workhouses. The front two are preserved as museum spaces. A creamery was developed on the site, opening in 1927, but is now closed. There is also, as with many workhouse sites, a cemetery to the back of the site.
21. The others are John Byrne, Dr. John Faran Harte (the Big Doctor) and George Wilkinson.
22. *The Leinster Express*, 8 November 2006. Van Diemen's Land was the former name of the Australian state of Tasmania and from 1803 it was a British penal colony. Some Irish were sent there for involvement with the Young Ireland Movement. From 1853 convicts were no longer sent there and the island changed its name to Tasmania in 1856. This suggests that Margaret Fitzgerald would not have been sent there in 1860, as the article suggests.
23. Publications up to the mid 1990s, both academic and popular, tend to date the Famine duration from 1845 to 1848, while subsequent publications invoke 1852 or later as an endpoint.



24. There are other examples of young females assigned a central position in cultural works on the theme of the Famine, including Alanna O’Kelly’s poignant sound installation *Ómos* (1994-95) developed from a performance piece and the hugely popular children’s book trilogy based on the Famine, by Marita Conlon-McKenna, *Under the Hawthorne Tree* (1990), *Wildflower Girl* (1992) and *Fields of Home* (1996).

#### Images

Figure 1: Dunfanaghy Workhouse Heritage Centre, Co. Donegal, Exterior View  
Photograph: by author  
Credit: Donegal Famine Heritage Centre (Dunfanaghy) Limited, also known as The Workhouse

Figure 2: Dunfanaghy Workhouse Heritage Centre, Co. Donegal, Room with Hannah as a girl  
Photograph: by author  
Credit: Donegal Famine Heritage Centre (Dunfanaghy) Limited, also known as The Workhouse

Figure 3: Dunfanaghy Workhouse Heritage Centre, Co. Donegal, Information Panel, Famine Room  
Photograph: by author  
Credit: Donegal Famine Heritage Centre (Dunfanaghy) Limited, also known as The Workhouse

Figure 4: Donaghmore Workhouse and Agricultural Museum, Co. Laois, Exterior View  
Photograph: by author  
Credit: Donaghmore Workhouse & Agricultural Museum

Figure 5: Donaghmore Workhouse and Agricultural Museum, Co. Laois, Dormitories  
Photograph: by author  
Credit: Donaghmore Workhouse & Agricultural Museum

Figure 6: Donaghmore Workhouse and Agricultural Museum, Co. Laois, Information Panel, Exhibition Room  
Photograph: by author  
Credit: Donaghmore Workhouse & Agricultural Museum

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