

## Waking the Bones: the Return of the Famine Dead in Contemporary Irish Literature

Melissa Fegan

Recent novels and plays about the Famine suggest that cosmopolitan and consumerist Ireland is a fragile palimpsest easily razed to disclose the history of dispossession, marginalization, betrayal and social fracture it is founded on. Irish culture is a shallow grave, prone to exhumations and resurfacings, and anxious placatory reburials. Rebels and patriots may be recovered and laid to rest with ceremony and pride, or employed to bolster ideological positions;<sup>1</sup> but the literal and metaphorical inhumation of Famine victims can arouse dangerous memories and contemporary resonances. Nina Witoszek and Pat Sheeran describe the 1984 interment in consecrated ground of the remains of a woman who died during the Famine, and was denied a decent burial because she was an unmarried mother, as ‘an act of atonement and reconciliation during a time of great public disquiet at the treatment of unmarried mothers in Ireland—the Kerry Babies, the Ann Lovett case, etc.’, but suggest the desired resolution was not achieved: ‘The Galway priest may have exhumed more than he bargained for’.<sup>2</sup> In Nuala O’Faolain’s novel *My Dream of You* (2001), the village of Mellary commemorates the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of 1798 (a year late, in 1999, so the guest of honour, an IRA man, can be released from Long Kesh), but the owner of the supermarket won’t allow the Famine Commemoration committee to erect a plaque on the wall of the former workhouse (now his car park), objecting that ‘[a]ll that kind of stuff was best forgotten’ in Celtic Tiger Ireland. The local librarian had put on an exhibition for the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Famine, but the records were threatening to the community:

How come so-and-so was admitted to the workhouse and their farm taken by their neighbours? Hadn’t the big shops in the town made a fortune out of supplying the workhouse [...]? Didn’t so-and-so’s great-grandfather get dismissed from supervising the women’s ward because of the advantage he was taking of some of the poor women?<sup>3</sup>

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See, for instance, the 2001 state funeral for Kevin Barry and nine other Volunteers executed in Mountjoy in 1920–1.

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Nina Witoszek and Pat Sheeran, *Talking to the Dead: A Study of Irish Funerary Traditions* (Amsterdam and Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 1998), 23.

3

Nuala O’Faolain, *My Dream of You* (London: Penguin, 2001), 220, 99, 67.

Contemporary prosperity might have come at the long-term cost of others less fortunate, too close to home.

The reburial of Famine victims is inflected with a particular shame; the bodies of the dead were treated with scant respect not just by the British state, or the Irish social élite, but by neighbours, friends and family. Ancient funerary traditions were not observed; indeed these traditions also fell victim to the Famine. Prior to the Famine, ways of waking and burying the dead once common to all groups in Northern Europe became increasingly identified as ‘hallmarks of Irishness’ to be observed with disdain and suspicion by the civilized.<sup>4</sup> David Lloyd points to the ‘Irish wake and its cloaked keener’ as the foremost ‘sign of Irish unruliness’ in the pre-Famine period.<sup>5</sup> For outsiders, the Irish funeral was exotic, melodramatic, insincere and expensive; Thomas Carlyle derided the keeners at a funeral he witnessed in Killarney in 1849 as ‘A pack of idle women [...] hoh-hoh-hoh-ing with a grief quite evidently hired, and not worth hiring’.<sup>6</sup> Henry Inglis disapproved of the ‘twenty-seven hackney-coaches and sixteen cars’ he counted in the funeral procession of ‘a person in the humbler walks of life’, and the carnivalesque finery of the mourners: ‘from the gaiety of the dresses, one might have easily mistaken the cavalcade for a procession of wedding guests’.<sup>7</sup> Lady Chatterton, describing the ‘deep-rooted regard to the rites of the dead, which is such a prominent characteristic in the Irish peasantry’, gave as an example a family who refused to spend fourpence to save the life of their starving child, but borrowed thirty shillings to wake him.<sup>8</sup>

There was also growing hostility and contempt for the wake and the keen from within Irish society in the nineteenth century. *Castle Rackrent* defines the wake as ‘a midnight

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Witoszek and Sheeran, *Talking to the Dead*, 26.

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David Lloyd, *Irish Culture and Colonial Modernity 1800–2000: Transformation of Oral Space* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 7.

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Thomas Carlyle, *Reminiscences of My Irish Journey in 1849* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1882), 116.

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Henry D. Inglis, *Ireland in 1834: A Journey Throughout Ireland, During the Spring, Summer, and Autumn of 1834*, 2 vols (London: Whittaker & Co., 1835), I 13–14.

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Lady Chatterton, *Rambles in the South of Ireland During the Year 1838*, 2 vols (London: Saunders and Otley, 1839), II 143–4.

meeting, held professedly for the indulgence of holy sorrow, but usually [...] converted into orgies of unholy joy', and the Editor points with mock regret to 'some alarming symptoms' of 'the declining taste for the Ullaloo in Ireland':

In a comic theatrical entertainment, represented not long since on the Dublin stage, a chorus of old women was introduced, who set up the Irish howl [...]. After the old women have continued their Ullaloo for a decent time, with all the necessary accompaniments of wringing their hands, wiping or rubbing their eyes with the corners of their gowns or aprons, &c. one of the mourners suddenly suspends her lamentable cries, and, turning to her neighbour, asks, 'Arrah now, honey, who is it we're crying for?'<sup>9</sup>

The respectable Andy Morrow in William Carleton's 'Larry M'Farland's Wake' is 'not in the habit of going to wakes; although, to do him justice, he's very friendly in going to a neighbour's funeral', suggesting the disreputable connotations of the former and the importance of the latter for social harmony; while Shane Fadh says runaway matches and improvident marriages can only be prevented if 'the wakes are stopped altogether'.<sup>10</sup> The powerful opposition of the Catholic church, and the rise of a Catholic middle class 'consciously modelling itself on a Protestant élite [...], for whom traditional funerary rituals involving lively wakes and lamentation for the dead were an embarrassment',<sup>11</sup> contributed to the decline, so that when James Mooney published 'The Funeral Customs of Ireland' in 1888, he acknowledged the beliefs and practices he described were 'now almost unknown to the younger generation in many parts of the country', a fact he attributes to education, the antipathy of Catholic priests to wakes, and 'the stirring political events of the last forty years' which have 'left them little time for the observance of former ceremonies'.<sup>12</sup>

The neglect of 'former ceremonies' is also a result of the Famine, as Mooney emphasizes in dating the decline between 1848 and 1888. The failure to mourn and bury the dead with due ceremony becomes the defining emblem of social disintegration during the

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Maria Edgeworth, *Castle Rackrent and Ennui*, ed. Marilyn Butler (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992), 137, 126–7.

<sup>10</sup>

William Carleton, 'Larry M'Farland's Wake', *Traits and Stories of the Irish Peasantry*, 2 vols (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe; Savage, Maryland: Barnes & Noble, 1990), I 105, 113.

<sup>11</sup>

Patricia Lysaght, 'Caoineadh os Cionn Coirp: The Lament for the Dead in Ireland', *Folklore*, 108 (1997), 65–82, at 67–8.

<sup>12</sup>

James Mooney, 'The Funeral Customs of Ireland', *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, 25:128 (Jul.–Dec. 1888), 243–96, at 259–60.

Famine, and '[o]ne of the commonest representational motifs' in its popular memory.<sup>13</sup> The mass grave, the sliding coffin and the body devoured by dogs, pigs or rats haunted the imagination. If the pre-Famine wake and funeral are signs of Irish excess, superstition and sedition, their disappearance becomes an even surer sign of the decay of civility and culture. For William Wilde, the burial of the dead 'Unwaked, *unkeened*,' is a shocking breach of custom, symptomatic of the breaking up of 'the very foundations of social intercourse' in Ireland: 'the very rites of sepulture, the most sacred and enduring of all the tributes of affection or respect, have been neglected or forgotten; the dead body has rotted where it fell, or formed a scanty meal for the famished dogs of the vicinity, or has been thrown, without prayer or mourning, into the adjoining ditch.'<sup>14</sup> As early as 1846, Thomas Campbell Foster was redefining the cultural difference of the British and Irish with regard to funeral practice:

We respect the remains of the dead, and give them a decent, though frequently a coldly formal burial; and if those decencies are ever discovered to be infringed upon, general indignation is sure to arrest the outrage. But in Ireland, in the west, the dead are tumbled into a hole like dogs, and seem, as they have departed this life, to be forgotten.<sup>15</sup>

Sidney Godolphin Osborne said of what he saw in Ireland in 1850: 'If it is true that want of respect for the dead is a sign of barbarism, of a truth, civilization is in rapid decay in the part of the world of which I am now writing.'<sup>16</sup>

The excessive grief or mirth of the pre-Famine funeral were replaced by callous disregard, such as that witnessed by the Irish artist James Mahony in Co. Cork, who saw gravediggers riding to the churchyard on the coffins of the workhouse dead, 'and smoking with much apparent enjoyment' while they did it. These bodies were at least granted a coffin; Mahony's often reproduced sketch 'Boy and Girl at Cahera' is a kind of screen image for another, more horrific one in the same location that he describes but chooses not to draw, for reasons of taste or respect for the dignity of the dead that he regrets is absent in those charged

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<sup>13</sup>

Niall Ó Ciosáin, 'Approaching a Folklore Archive: The Irish Folklore Commission and the Memory of the Great Famine', *Folklore*, 115:2 (Aug. 2004), 222–32, at 225.

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<sup>15</sup> William Wilde, *Irish Popular Superstitions* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1979), 10.

<sup>16</sup> Thomas Campbell Foster, *Letters on the Condition of the People of Ireland* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1846), 195.

<sup>16</sup>

Sidney Godolphin Osborne, *Gleanings in the West of Ireland* (London: T. & W. Boone, 1850), 137.

with dealing with them: ‘another of the many sepulchres above ground, where six dead bodies had lain for twelve days, without the least chance of interment, owing to their being so far from the town. [...] all sympathy between the living and the dead seems completely out of the question; and the revolting practice will, doubtless, go on until it works its own remedy.’<sup>17</sup> The impossibility of ‘sympathy between the living and the dead’ implies mutual antipathy, reflecting old fears that the dead denied their rights (and rites) are dangerous and active enemies. The wake was crucial not only in supporting the living and strengthening social bonds, but also in placating the angry dead and ensuring they would not return.<sup>18</sup> Their bodies were as much to be dreaded as their spirits; Thomas O’Flynn testified to the way fear of fever led to shameful betrayals: ‘when persons were found dead in the fields or along the road, their own kith and kin often denied knowing them’.<sup>19</sup> Lord Dufferin and George Boyle commented on the ‘moral depravity’ of the starving poor in Skibbereen, instancing a local man pointed out to them by the local clergyman: ‘It is only a week ago since that man dragged the dead body of his father by the heels across the road, through all the mud and mire, in order that he might fling him into the coffin!’<sup>20</sup> The indifference of the living to the anonymous dead pales in comparison to the self-preservative apathy or even cruelty shown by the living to their own familiar dying and dead.

And yet the desperate attempts of the poor during the Famine to bury their dead decently is a dominant image in travel narratives, folklore and literature. The treatment of the dead during the Famine highlights what Ó Gráda describes as ‘hierarchies of suffering’: ‘It was not “society” [...] but the very poor in that society who were unable to bury their dead’.<sup>21</sup> One recurring figure is the emaciated family member who carries a body on their back many

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James Mahony, ‘Sketches in the West of Ireland’, *Illustrated London News*, 10 (Jan. to Jun. 1847),

116.

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19 Seán Ó Súilleabháin, *Irish Wake Amusements* (Cork and Dublin: Mercier Press, 1997), 171–2.

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20 Cathal Póirtéir, *Famine Echoes* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1995), 105.

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Lord Dufferin and G. F. Boyle, *Narrative of a Journey from Oxford to Skibbereen During the Year of the Irish Famine* (Oxford: John Henry Parker, 1847), 18–19.

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Cormac Ó Gráda, *Famine: A Short History* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2009), 90; *Ireland’s Great Famine: Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2006), 225.

miles to bury it in a scanty grave in consecrated ground; several of these are remembered in Póirtéir's *Famine Echoes*, such as Una McDermot from Teelin, who carried her dead son five miles to the nearest graveyard, and not having a coffin, buried him in his cradle, or the man called Scanlan who carried his wife to Leitrim graveyard 'sitting on a súgán fastened over his shoulders, and she was dressed in her cloak and hood just as she'd been when she was alive'.<sup>22</sup> While the chapel bell tolled for the funeral of a 'respectable young woman' in Co. Mayo, a young man carried the bodies of his brothers to the cemetery in a sack:

In one corner he dug, with his own emaciated feeble hands, a grave, and put them in, uncoffined, and covered them, while the clods were falling upon the coffin of the respectable young woman. [...] This poor boy unheeded had stayed in the dark cabin with those dead brothers, not even getting admittance into the gate till some respectable one should want a burial; then he might follow this procession at a suitable distance, with two dead brothers upon his back, and put them in with his own hands, with none to compassionate him!<sup>23</sup>

Bodies were abandoned on tombstones or at the doors of the wealthy, like foundling children, in the hope that they would be given a decent burial. Those who scorned to beg for food would beg for money to bury their dead: James Mahony's illustration 'Woman Begging at Clonakilty' depicts 'a woman carrying in her arms the corpse of a fine child, and making the most distressing appeal to the passengers for aid to enable her to purchase a coffin and bury her dear little baby'.<sup>24</sup> She was one of many who flocked to the town for this purpose. The poorhouse was only entered willingly when death was near, in the (often futile) hope of being buried in a coffin. In the last resort, a family's final possession, the cabin, could become a makeshift tomb, such as the one Elihu Burritt saw in Skibbereen, the door nailed fast by the father against the dogs: 'It was the cheapest and quickest grave he could make for himself and his family.'<sup>25</sup>

### **Sending them off mean: Famine funerals in Irish literature**

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Póirtéir, *Famine Echoes*, 183, 188. A súgán is a rope made of straw.

<sup>23</sup>

Asenath Nicholson, *Annals of the Famine in Ireland*, ed. Maureen Murphy (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 1998), 117.

<sup>24</sup>

Mahony, 'Sketches in the West of Ireland', 100.

<sup>25</sup>

Elihu Burritt, *The Mission of Great Sufferings* (London: Sampson Low, Son, and Marston, 1867), 155.

The social and political significance of the failure to bury the dead properly is evident in literary representations of the Famine from the 1840s to the present day. In Carleton's *The Black Prophet* (1846), Peggy Murtagh's parents are so distracted by hunger that even at her wake they barely remember her death, and can only feel their loss once the neighbours have fed them; in *The Squanders of Castle Squander* (1852), dogs prowl in the graveyard, feeding on the inadequately buried dead.<sup>26</sup> James Clarence Mangan's apocalyptic 'The Funerals' epitomises the Famine as a procession of 'endless FUNERALS', sweeping with unseemly haste, skeletons replacing keeners on the hearses, and the earth 'one groanful grave'; in 'The Famine Year', Lady Wilde's famished wretches threaten that on Judgement Day their 'whitening bones' will rise 'in their charred, uncoffin'd masses' to testify against those who hoarded or exported the food that might have saved them, and allowed them to die 'as a dog would die'.<sup>27</sup> The starving Dick Considine in Margaret Brew's *Castle Cloyne* (1885) is entirely indifferent to the corpse of his wife Judy, but following his emigration to America he cannot rest until his shame at the manner of his wife and child's death and burial is assuaged, and he sends £10 to Oonagh for a tombstone: 'and when it was erected, no one who saw it could ever imagine that they who slept beneath it were the victims of famine'.<sup>28</sup> Liam O'Flaherty's *Famine* (1937) ends with the death of Brian Kilmartin in the effort to dig a grave for his wife.<sup>29</sup> Tom Murphy's *Famine* (1968) opens with the wake of the Connors' daughter—the food denied her while living is lavished on her wake for 'We can't send them off mean'. Convinced, despite memories of bodies abandoned in ditches in previous famines, that respect for the dead will survive, the villagers plan to make and sell coffins, but the lapse of custom thwarts them: 'Carney buried the wife in a bag last night.'<sup>30</sup> In Joseph O'Connor's

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William Carleton, *The Black Prophet: A Tale of Irish Famine* (London and Belfast: Simms and M'Intyre, 1847) 152–62; William Carleton, *The Squanders of Castle Squander*, 2 vols (London: Office of the Illustrated London Library, 1852), II 139.

<sup>27</sup>

James Clarence Mangan, 'The Funerals', and Lady Wilde, 'The Famine Year', in Christopher Morash (ed.), *The Hungry Voice: The Poetry of the Irish Famine* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1989), 133–4, 221–2.

<sup>28</sup>

Margaret Brew, *The Chronicles of Castle Cloyne; or, Pictures of the Munster People*, 3 vols (London: Chapman and Hall, 1885), I 60.

<sup>29</sup>

Liam O'Flaherty, *Famine* (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1992), 447–8.

<sup>30</sup>

Tom Murphy, *Famine, Plays 1* (London: Methuen, 1997), 16, 71.

*Star of the Sea* (2002), a family slash the face of their dead mother before she's buried at sea, to avoid the shame of her body washing ashore and being recognized.<sup>31</sup> In Peter Behrens's *The Law of Dreams* (2006), Fergus's repeated failure to bury his dead—his parents and sisters, Luke and Phoebe, Murty Larry and Ormsby—means he can never be free of them.<sup>32</sup> In David Gow's play *Wake of the Bones* (2010), a wooden skeleton is made and waked as a proxy for the 6,000 dead Irish immigrants uncovered during the construction of the Victoria Bridge in Montreal, to ensure the surviving immigrants can live and prosper.<sup>33</sup>

The language of improper burial, haunting, exhumation, and reburial also dominates the discourse on the commemoration of the Famine. For Ian Baucom 'the Famine dead, it seems, must be unburied and then buried again, recovered from their walled-up cabins and submarine cemeteries and then replaced in memory before the past with which they haunt the island's present can be complete'.<sup>34</sup> David Lloyd suggests the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary commemorations of the Famine (which frequently took the form of memorial sculptures and plaques in graveyards and at the sites of mass burial pits) represented an 'attempt to lay to rest at last the ghosts of that demographic disaster so that Ireland could move on to take its place psychically as well as economically among the developed industrial nations'.<sup>35</sup> Such metaphorical exhumation of the Famine dead in the act of remembering becomes literal in a number of novels set in Ireland in the late twentieth century, where the bones of Famine victims are discovered, or twentieth-century protagonists are haunted by Famine spectres: for example Ann Cheetham's *Black Harvest* (1983); Alan Ryan's *Cast a Cold Eye* (1984); Seán Kenny's *The Hungry Earth* (1995); James Heneghan's *The Grave* (2000); Carol Birch's *The Naming of Eliza Quinn* (2005); and Gemma Mawdsley's *The Paupers' Graveyard* (2009). These novels from a variety of genres (Cheetham's and Heneghan's are children's novels,

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<sup>31</sup>

Joseph O'Connor, *Star of the Sea: Farewell to Old Ireland* (London: Vintage, 2003), xvii.

<sup>32</sup>

Peter Behrens, *The Law of Dreams* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2007).

<sup>33</sup>

I am indebted to David Gow for access to the unpublished script of *Wake of the Bones*, first staged in Hudson, Quebec, in 2010.

<sup>34</sup>

Ian Baucom, 'Found Drowned: The Irish Atlantic', in John Kucich and Dianne F. Sadoff (eds), *Victorian Afterlives: Postmodern Culture Rewrites the Nineteenth Century* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 135.

<sup>35</sup>

Lloyd, *Irish Culture and Colonial Modernity*, 23.



Ryan's, Kenny's and Mawdsley's are broadly horror, Birch's highly accomplished literary fiction) share a number of motifs identifying them with Robert F. Garratt's definition of the trauma novel: 'a reconstruction of events through memories, flashbacks, dreams, and hauntings'; 'temporal scrambling' (in the case of these Famine novels, not only multiple chronologies but protagonists who time-travel to experience the Famine first-hand); and a relationship to the past which 'suggests uncanny ways in which the present generation repeats the actions of its ancestors'.<sup>36</sup>

In these novels the bones or ghosts of Famine victims are usually discovered in the west or south of Ireland, not only to emphasize the greater scale of mortality in these areas, but to offer an opportunity to explore the continuing opposition between the rural and metropolitan in modern Ireland. In *Cast a Cold Eye*, Ryan's protagonist, Jack Quinlan, an American suspense writer researching a novel about the Famine, is struck by the familiarity of modern, relatively cosmopolitan Dublin, symbolized by its Radio Shack where 'Only the soft Irish accents were different'. In a pub called, ironically perhaps, The Ship, Jack finds the clientele are 'in American terms, upper-middle class or possibly lower-upper class businessmen, most still in their three-piece suits'. In Ballyvas, Co. Clare, however, Jack feels initially alienated by 'the sheer and primitive *foreignness* of the place', particularly its Irish-speaking pub.<sup>37</sup> Turlough Walsh in *The Hungry Earth* belongs among 'the well-heeled and well-spoken, well-met and well-oiled [...] elite of white-collar Dublin'. This self-satisfied parvenu's BMW is parked 'where once there had been a mews to house the horses of the gentry who had built and lived in these splendid brick abodes. It always pleased Turlough to make that comparison. Didn't it add to the aura of power about him?' For Turlough Mayo is relentlessly backward, 'a perfect picture of the desolation of rural Ireland',<sup>38</sup> but like Jack, Turlough eventually chooses to live in the west, embracing what he perceives to be a more genuine existence, following his Famine experience.

Those responsible for unearthing and reburying the Famine dead in these novels are often the descendants of emigrants, with familial links to the dead. Thirteen-year-old Tom in

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<sup>36</sup>

Robert F. Garratt, *Trauma and History in the Irish Novel: The Return of the Dead* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2011), 5, 7.

<sup>37</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Alan Ryan, *Cast a Cold Eye* (London: Sphere Books, 1986), 12, 19, 35.

<sup>38</sup>

Seán Kenny, *The Hungry Earth* (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1995), 10, 23, 53.

*The Grave* falls into a newly-discovered mass burial pit in Liverpool in 1974 and wakes on Achill in 1847, where he meets his ancestors and helps them survive the Famine and escape to Liverpool, where two of them succumb to fever and are buried in the pit. Tom, a foundling, partially recovers his hidden identity through this very direct encounter with his long-dead family, changing his name from Mullen to Monaghan to assert it. In *The Paupers' Graveyard*, an Irish-American bacteriologist drawn back to Ireland is instrumental in laying to rest the ghost of her great-great-great-grandmother, who had made huge sacrifices to get her two young daughters to America at the height of the Famine. Jack in *Cast a Cold Eye*, and Beatrice Conrad in *The Naming of Eliza Quinn*, are also Irish-American; New Yorker Beatrice, weary of her vacuous Upper West Side lifestyle, describes her desire to escape to Ireland as 'a kind of hunger [...] for quiet'.<sup>39</sup> The instrumentality of the returnee in these novels might suggest that only those descended from one group of Famine victims, those forced to emigrate, are fit to bring peace to those other victims who died at home, or untainted by the guilt of those who remained and profited from the death or disappearance of 'surplus' population. However, both Jack and Beatrice are wealthy, and their grandmothers emigrated after rather than during the Famine; Beatrice's grandmother's family, the Veseys, stayed in Ireland and prospered, often at the expense of their poorer neighbours. There may be an implicit critique here of the tendency noted by Ó Gráda and others to see emigrants, rather than those who died in Ireland, as archetypal Famine victims.<sup>40</sup> In fact, those who come closest to experiencing the events of the Famine are the English children in *Black Harvest*, who begin to starve and fall ill in their haunted Irish holiday home; the orphaned outsider, Oliver, like Danny in Stephen King's *The Shining*, possesses an uncanny energy that resurrects the Famine ghosts.

### **Haunted cabins and ghost estates in contemporary Famine novels**

Inherited cabins function in these novels as '*lieux de mémoire* where memory crystallizes and secretes itself'.<sup>41</sup> The cabin is inscribed with the history of Famine, both a makeshift grave

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<sup>39</sup>

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

<sup>40</sup>

Ó Gráda, *Ireland's Great Famine*, 219.

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

and a potent symbol of the politics of land ownership before, during and after the Famine. In *Eliza Quinn* Beatrice inherits a cottage in Co. Kerry from her grandmother, Lizzie Vesey. The cottage has retained its original name, Darby's House, linking it indelibly to Darby Quinn, evicted during the Famine due to false information given by Lizzie's grandmother Eliza Vesey, and to Darby's young daughter Eliza Quinn, whose body is hidden in the hollow tree in its garden by Lizzie Vesey's father. The 'ghosts of old potato ridges' and Darby's House are eerie remnants of the once populous village of Kildarragh, and Beatrice's family story, rooted in the dissolution of communal ties in the face of hunger and fever, emerges 'like the marks of the famine coming through the landscape'.<sup>42</sup> In all three of the novel's chronological planes the Veseys are considerably wealthier than the Quinns. The Veseys buy the townland (including the Quinns' cottage) following the Famine; in 1900 Darby Quinn's grandson Tom is described as a 'bogtrotter' by Hanna Vesey, and the Quinns live in a tiny mud-walled cabin where Lizzie Vesey feels 'like a queen in a hovel'; in 1969 Beatrice finds in the graveyard 'a whole host of Veseys but no Quinns', emphasizing their continued effacement and dispossession.<sup>43</sup> In 1850, there is clear resentment of those who had profited by the Famine; the Veseys' neighbour Tadhg O'Donnell complains of the Terences, who fed their pigs on Indian meal during the Famine and were better off now than ever: 'they'd get a shock one day. Memories were long'.<sup>44</sup> Yet by 1969 even the Quinns have forgotten their link to Kildarragh. Memories are not long enough, and the cabin, the landscape it inhabits and Eliza Quinn's bones are silent witnesses.

In *The Hungry Earth* Turlough inherits a cottage near Killala from his alcoholic grand-uncle Bernie, who had died in a lunatic asylum. Turlough's only thought is to make some money from selling the place, but on his first night there he is knocked unconscious, and wakes in 1846, in a stone hut, next to a blackened corpse. His cottage, he discovers, is built on the site of a cabin used to isolate those with fever; the dead man's granddaughter, Bríd Kernan, says 'no one will go near the cabin, not even to tumble it', and Turlough realizes its history explains his family record of mental illness: 'No wonder it was haunted forever after. No wonder Uncle Bernie and all the rest of them had lost their minds, living in

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<sup>42</sup>

Birch, *Eliza Quinn*, 7, 38.

<sup>43</sup>

Birch, *Eliza Quinn*, 90, 99, 45.

<sup>44</sup>

Birch, *Eliza Quinn*, 334.

a place that had such a hideous past.’<sup>45</sup> Turlough attempts to undo this historical curse in part through providing burial; when Nan Kernan falls ill and her terrified family leave her in the cabin, Turlough selflessly tends her till she dies, and helps bury her. Discovering the frozen corpse of Bríd and Nan’s mother, Sheila Kernan, left behind because the poorhouse wagon carrying the dead is full, Turlough insists it is taken for burial. But Turlough is haunted by the disappearance of the Kernans’ youngest child, Maura, kidnapped by the local Whiteboy leader—and cannibal—Lorcan MacCurran; Maura’s remains are never discovered, and while MacCurran has a lavish tomb, Turlough can find no record of the Kernans in the graveyard.

As Beatrice recognizes in *Eliza Quinn*, ‘the disturbance of bones is often the prelude to a haunting’.<sup>46</sup> The disturbance of the bones of Famine victims during the erection of new buildings is a particularly potent way to suggest the haunting of Irish modernity by the traumatic past. In *The Grave*, the burial pit is excavated during the building of a new school, opening a ‘crossroads in time’ sending Tom back to 1847.<sup>47</sup> In *Black Harvest*, the luxurious modern house of an Irish-American industrialist is built on the site of the cabin of the Morrisseys, evicted during the Famine. Hidden beneath the new house are the bones of the Morrisseys, who had crawled back to their cabin to die, and whose terrifying spirits can only be appeased when their bones are discovered and buried. Their sole descendant, Donal Morrissey, lives in a caravan nearby, emphasizing the family’s continuing exclusion. Even more luridly, in *The Paupers’ Graveyard* the bones of Famine victims unearthed during the construction of a new housing estate in 2003 are concealed and incinerated by the unscrupulous builder, unleashing not only spectres but typhus which has lain dormant in the soil, infecting the newcomers. In an obvious nod towards the ‘ghost estates’, which Emilie Pine notes have given ‘the idea of a haunted Irish rural landscape [...] new meaning’,<sup>48</sup> at the end of the novel the houses stand empty, their former owners clamouring for compensation.

## Spectres of Famine

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Kenny, *Hungry Earth*, 118.

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Birch, *Eliza Quinn*, 16.

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James Heneghan, *The Grave* (London: Corgi, 2002), 236.

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Emilie Pine, *The Politics of Irish Memory: Performing Remembrance in Contemporary Irish Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 164.

Inheritance, Derrida argues, means ‘coming to terms with [...] some specter’, while to mourn is ‘to make sure that the dead will not come back’.<sup>49</sup> Those not accorded the proper rituals are ‘the most dangerous dead’, with ‘an intense desire for vengeance’ on the living.<sup>50</sup> However, the spectres in Famine novels are not, on the whole, malign, with the exception of the murderous rapist Black Jack in *The Paupers’ Graveyard*, who gleefully reprises his rapaciousness after death. The ghosts of the Morrisseys in *Black Harvest* are aggressive in their desperation; Prill and Colin Blakeman see at their window a ‘withered, pain-filled face that accused and begged them, silently’, and Prill is accosted by two misshapen, monkey-like children, pleading for food.<sup>51</sup> The children are forced to experience the Famine, exhibiting symptoms of malnutrition and fever, while their mother withdraws into stony indifference. The Blakemans are offered a grim double perspective: that of the wealthy observer terrified by the spectacle of starvation, and that of the dying themselves. The 1986 Sphere edition of *Cast a Cold Eye* announces on its back cover that ‘the bloody spectre of the Famine is hungry for new life’, and ‘only by joining forces with the village in a horrifying ritual can the living be left in peace by the dead’.<sup>52</sup> Yet the spectres are pathetic and horrifying rather than actively dangerous; they are emblematic figures taken directly from Thomas Gallagher’s *Paddy’s Lament*: a skeletal man with a green mouth; a woman who has eaten the legs of her dead baby; a girl who runs alongside the car for miles.<sup>53</sup> The woman has ‘a mouthful of dark red blood’, and the girl ‘bloody lips’ and ‘hands that clung, [...] that brushed pointy nails across the backs of his hands, that reached and grasped at his face and the back of his neck’. But these vampiric qualities are undermined by their helplessness; the girl is unbearably fragile, ‘only bone with a covering of skin, [...] only pointy cheekbones and dark-shadowed eyes,

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Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York and London: Routledge, 1994), 21, 97.

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Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press and Routledge and Keegan Paul, 1960), 160–1.

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Ann Cheetham, *Black Harvest* (London: Armada, 1983), 58, 67.

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Ryan, *Cast a Cold Eye*, back cover.

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See Thomas Gallagher, *Paddy’s Lament: Ireland 1846–1847: Prelude to Hatred* (Swords: Poolbeg Press, 1988), 15, 112–13, 29–31.

[...] only running bony legs and pumping elbows’, and Jack’s instinct is protective.<sup>54</sup> Once Jack has recognized that he ‘*belonged* [...] among these people whose blood flowed in his own veins and had flowed there all his life’, he is ready to take part in the annual All Hallows Eve ritual bloodletting, which allows the spectres, who also belong in this place, ‘these earlier faces and lives of the town, come back now [...] to be among their own’, to be blessed and released.<sup>55</sup>

These ghosts are not simply fragments of the tortured past to be exorcized through the performance of neglected rituals, but a call to change in the present. Folklore records the enduring fear of places where Famine victims had died; Peig Sayers was warned by her mother not to pick blackberries where a cabin containing dead bodies had been set on fire, while Éamon a’ Búrc of Carna told a collector of local fields where entire households had been buried. The present owners carefully avoided those spots.<sup>56</sup> However, William Carleton’s ‘Fair Gurtha; or, The Hungry Grass’ (1856) is an early literary example of the recuperative nature of the memory of hunger; the superstition that stepping on ‘hungry grass’ (which James Mooney suggests is supposed to grow where a corpse has lain) causes one to suffer the pangs of famine, promotes kindness and benevolence through the punishment of the ‘penurious in spirit’ and those ‘deficient in the duties of hospitality’.<sup>57</sup> The characters in these novels tread on hungry grass, on land haunted by the shameful neglect of the dead, in order to recognize and potentially rectify social deficiencies in their own time or in themselves. Seán Kenny, who began writing *The Hungry Earth* after attending a workshop in Los Angeles called ‘Return to Innocence: A Healing Journey for Irish Catholics’, and who describes the legacy of the Famine as a post-traumatic stress disorder, sees his protagonist, Turlough, as initially ‘symbolis[ing] today’s vacuous and morally bankrupt Irish society’.<sup>58</sup>

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Ryan, *Cast a Cold Eye*, 57–8, 173–4.

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Ryan, *Cast a Cold Eye*, 242, 244.

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Cormac Ó Gráda, *Black ’47 and Beyond: The Great Irish Famine in History, Economy, and Memory* (Princeton: NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 211–12.

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Mooney, ‘Funeral Customs of Ireland’, 292; William Carleton, ‘Fair Gurtha; or, The Hungry Grass. A Legend of the Dumb Hill’, *Dublin University Magazine*, 47:280 (April 1856), 414–35, at 415.

58

Seán Kenny, ‘A Nightmare Revisited’, in Tom Hayden (ed.), *Irish Hunger: Personal Reflections on the Legacy of the Famine* (Boulder, Colorado: Robert Rinehart, 1998), 181–90, at 184.

The re-educated Turlough says his country is ‘like a person who has been horribly abused as a child [...]. And I see no other possibility for healing our society than to look back and remember the past, all of it, honestly, no matter how painful’.<sup>59</sup> Turlough excels in the cut-throat accountancy firm he works in; aware in a time of economic crisis that ‘he would not be immune to the repercussions if the others all got hungry at the same time’, he is proactively ruthless in eliminating competitors.<sup>60</sup> Yet his experience of the Famine leads him to offer his life to save the Kernan children, and transforms him back in the 1990s into a local holy man and historian. He becomes part of the community, and interested for the first time in contemporary marginalized groups, such as the tinkers, who give him a soup cauldron that becomes the heart of his Famine Museum. Part of his coming to terms with the past is the devastating recognition that in the hierarchy of suffering his own ancestors were not victims but predators; he had inherited the land through MacCurran, who had literally and metaphorically fed on his neighbours.

Jonny Geber describes the reburial of more than 970 individuals discovered during the excavation of the intramural burial ground in Kilkenny Union workhouse as an opportunity to give them ‘their final respectful treatment in death, which they were denied when they died about 160 years previously’.<sup>61</sup> The reburial of a body is a significant act, ‘insert[ing] the dead person differently as an ancestor (more central or more peripheral) within the lineage of honored forebears’.<sup>62</sup> In these novels, this resolution is offered only in the children’s texts: in *The Grave*, Tom rescues the coffins of his ancestors and buries them in consecrated ground, and in *Black Harvest* the Morrisseys are buried in the family plot in a fine coffin. The others suggest a more ambiguous outcome of the reburial of the Famine dead. In *The Paupers’ Graveyard* the ghost of Black Jack still haunts the graveyard, and the bones are incinerated due to fear of typhus. *The Hungry Earth* ends with Turlough’s ‘primal scream’ when the

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<sup>59</sup>

Kenny, *Hungry Earth*, 202–3. See also Sinéad O’Connor’s 1994 rap ‘Famine’: ‘See we’re like a child that’s been battered/ [...]And if there ever is gonna be healing / There has to be remembering / And then grieving’ (*Universal Mother* (Ensign, 1994)).

<sup>60</sup>

Kenny, *Hungry Earth*, 9.

<sup>61</sup>

Jonny Geber, ‘Burying the Famine dead: Kilkenny Union workhouse’, in John Crowley, William J. Smyth, and Mike Murray (eds), *Atlas of the Great Irish Famine* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2012), 341–8.

<sup>62</sup>

Katherine Verdery, *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies: Reburial and Postsocialist Change* (New York: Columbia Press, 1999), 41.

newly-cleared gravestone of Lorcan MacCurran reveals their family tie. In *Eliza Quinn* the bones are given a decent burial, but the town fails to discover the identity of the child, and if, as Derrida suggests, mourning is contingent on the ability ‘to ontologize remains [...] by *identifying* the bodily remains and by *localizing* the dead’,<sup>63</sup> the failure to name her prevents her insertion as an ‘honored forebear’. Beatrice and Luke Quinn conceive a child in Darby’s House who will be named Eliza Quinn Conrad, bringing the two sides of the family together, but the novel ends with Beatrice back in New York, insisting Luke emigrate there, and planning to turn Darby’s House into a holiday home for ‘back-to-the-land’ types from Dublin. The potential for new life is also suggested by the relationship of Jack and Gráinne in *Cast a Cold Eye*, symbolically consummated in a ruined Famine village; but the annual ritual to release the spirits continues because so many died, and new graves must also be doused in blood to prevent their rising too. Jack’s decision to remain in Ballyvas as one of the curators of the spectres seems a validation of pastoral nostalgia, but the novel’s 1980s setting is inflected with violence: Fr Henning prays for a united Ireland ‘freed from its English oppressors who still occupied part of its land’, and there’s a reference to the shooting of a Catholic in Derry.<sup>64</sup> Similarly *Eliza Quinn*’s ‘present’ is 1969–70, while *The Hungry Earth* and *The Paupers’ Graveyard* are situated explicitly against 1990s economic boom and bust. David Lloyd argues that the injunction to mourn the Famine dead masks the desire to forget them, ‘letting the dead slip away without the trace of a wake behind them’.<sup>65</sup> These novels suggest that those who seek to wake and bury the Famine dead can only ever achieve partial release from the ghosts of the past.

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<sup>63</sup>

Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 9.

<sup>64</sup>

Ryan, *Cast a Cold Eye*, 222, 59.

<sup>65</sup>

David Lloyd, ‘The Memory of Hunger’, in David L. Eng and David Kazanjian (eds) *Loss: The Politics of Mourning* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 2003), 205–28, at 219.