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The Great Famine in Literature 1846–1896

That the Great Famine can provide excellent material for novels may seem commonplace in the wake of Joseph O'Connor's bestselling *Star of the Sea* (2002), but O'Connor's success led Terry Eagleton to wonder why so few Irish writers had used it before:

The Irish famine of the 1840s was the greatest social catastrophe of 19th-century Europe, yet inspired surprisingly little imaginative writing. There is a powerful novel by Liam O'Flaherty and a starkly moving drama by the contemporary playwright Tom Murphy. But in both Yeats and Joyce it is no more than a dim resonance. It is as though African-Americans were to maintain an embarrassed silence about the slave trade (Eagleton 2003: 26).

O'Connor has said that his novel was in part a response to Eagleton's earlier question: 'There is a handful of novels and a body of poems, but few truly distinguished works. Where is the Famine in the literature of the Revival? Where is it in Joyce?' (Eagleton 1995: 13). O'Connor 'felt it implicitly threw down a challenge' (Estévez-Saá, 163).

Eagleton's belief that the Famine was shrouded in silence was shared by many. Christopher Morash, author of the first book-length study of Famine literature, *Writing the Irish Famine* (1995), remembered: 'Back in the mid-1980s, when I told colleagues about my work, the response was almost always the same. I would get a quizzical look, followed by: "There's not much to study, is there?"' (Morash 2006: 300). In fact, there was such a wealth of material that Margaret Kelleher's *Feminization of Famine* (1997), Melissa Fegan's *Literature and the Irish Famine 1845-1919* (2002) and Stuart McLean's *The Event and its Terrors* (2004) were shortly to follow. O'Connor (and Eagleton) should have had no difficulty in finding other

novelists who had already broken the silence surrounding the Great Famine. The year before *Star of the Sea* was published, two Famine novels, Niall Williams's *The Fall of Light*, and Nuala O'Faolain's *My Dream of You*, emerged; Carol Birch's *The Naming of Eliza Quinn* followed in 2005. These novels are just the latest manifestations of a sustained literary interest in the Famine. Eagleton acknowledges Murphy's *Famine* (1968), and O'Flaherty's *Famine* (1937), but might also have considered William Trevor's 'The News from Ireland' (1986), John Banville's *Birchwood* (1973), or one of the countless other texts in which the Famine is either central or a potent image or metaphor, including Sean O'Faolain's 'Midsummer Night Madness' (1932), Patrick Kavanagh's 'The Great Hunger' (1942), and the poetry of Seamus Heaney and Eavan Boland. The collection of essays *Hungry Words: Images of Famine in the Irish Canon* (2006), suggests that references to the Famine are pervasive in Irish literature – even in Joyce and Yeats (Cusack and Goss). One of the most recent commentators on Famine literature, Bernhard Klein, argues that: 'the sheer force of this continuous literary interest in the Great Hunger makes Eagleton's confident assumption that the "Famine is the threatened death of the signifier" look rather wildly off target. [...] the great "literary silence" of the Famine is in fact no silence at all but rather a loud roaring' (Klein, 51).

This 'loud roaring' began during the Famine (1845–52); authors such as William Carleton, Mary Anne Hoare, James Clarence Mangan, Jane Francesca Elgee, Samuel Ferguson and Aubrey de Vere wrote about the Famine while it was still taking place, and in the fifty years that followed several novelists and poets – many of whom had experienced the Famine at first-hand – relived the devastation in their works. For subsequent writers and readers, 'the Famine is primarily a retrospective, textual creation' (Morash 1995: 3), but in the second half of the nineteenth century the

Famine was frequently a vivid memory. Authors (or their narrators) express a reluctance to remember the horror, or an incapacity to represent it adequately. Randy O’Rollick, narrator of William Carleton’s *The Squanders of Castle Squander* (1852), describes the Famine as:

something so utterly unprecedented in the annals of human life, as the mingled mass of agony was borne past us upon the wild and pitiless blast, that we find ourselves absolutely incompetent even to describe it. We feel, however, as if that loud and multitudinous wail was still ringing in our ears, against which and the terrible recollections associated with it, we wish we could close them and the memory that brings them into fresh existence (Carleton 1852a: II 105).

Margaret Brew, who was a child at the tail-end of the Famine, attests in *The Chronicles of Castle Cloyne* (1885) that ‘many still living can remember it well; and their hearts ache, and their thoughts become very sad and solemn, whenever the memory of it comes back upon them’ (Brew, II 165). Translating that memory into words that will affect the reader for whom the Famine is not a memory is problematic: ‘Only the pen of Dante could describe it; only the brush of Rembrandt, in its darkest and most lurid colours, could portray it!’ (Brew, III 107-08). Even Dante may be inadequate, as ‘the horrors of his Ugolino’s dungeon fade into nothingness before the every-day tragedies of our Irish cabins’ (Hoare, 206).

The task of representing the Famine was an onerous one, a duty performed with no expectation of reward. Publishers and readers could be hostile. Carleton was careful to assure his readers that ‘the principal interest’ of *The Black Prophet* was not ‘so gloomy a topic as famine’ (Carleton 1847: iv), and built his plot around a murder mystery and love triangle to prove it. Anthony Trollope begins *Castle Richmond* (1860) with an acknowledgment that he will need to convince his reader:

I wonder whether the novel-reading world [...] will be offended if I lay the plot of this story in Ireland! That there is a strong feeling against things Irish it is impossible to deny. Irish servants need not apply; Irish acquaintances are treated with limited confidence; Irish cousins are regarded as being decidedly dangerous; and Irish stories are not popular with the booksellers (Trollope 1989: 1).

Those writing during the Famine took the opportunity to intervene, urging others to relieve the present suffering and warning of what was to come. Carleton's *The Black Prophet* began as a serial in the *Dublin University Magazine* in early 1846. At that stage, following one season's blight, there was no reason to suspect that this was not simply an instance of the perennial hardship faced by the Irish peasantry, as stressed by Carleton's non-specific subtitle, 'A Tale of Irish Famine'. Carleton based his story not on the present crisis, but on his memories of the famines of 1817 and 1822, and he assumed that this famine would be just one in a long line of similar events, soon to be supplanted by another and significant only to those who had suffered: 'National inflictions of this kind pass away, and are soon forgotten by every one but those with whom they have left their melancholy memorials' (Carleton 1847: iv). He could so easily have been right; the economic historian Cormac Ó Gráda argues that: 'Ironically, had the potato famine of 1845 lasted just one year, it would have merited no more than a few paragraphs in the history books' (Ó Gráda, 5). Carleton wanted to use his novel to ensure not just that this famine would be remembered, but that it would be the final one. The one-volume edition of *The Black Prophet* published in early 1847 was dedicated to Lord John Russell, and Carleton urged that: 'as it is the first Tale of Irish Famine that ever was dedicated to an English Prime Minister, your Lordship's enlarged and enlightened policy will put it out of the power of any

succeeding author ever to write another' (Carleton 1847). The novel was to be 'an act of public usefulness to his countrymen', 'calculated to awaken those who legislate for us into something like a humane perception of a calamity that has been almost perennial in the country' (Carleton 1847: iii-iv).

Hoare's story 'A Sketch of Famine', written in 1847, is similarly urgent: 'while I write, such things, and worse, if possible, are happening throughout our land' (Hoare, 206). Hoare is concerned about a hardening of English attitudes towards Famine victims, and the drying up of charitable donations, in the wake of a flood of Famine immigrants to English cities and reports that relief money was being used to buy arms for the assassination of landlords and a future rising. By October, *The Times* was warning: 'Where a sovereign was given last year, it will be a half-crown this; where half-a-crown then, a shilling now; where a shilling, nothing at all. [...] public benevolence, which at all times is rather hard to keep alive, will go out altogether' (9 October 1847: 4). Hoare seeks to dispel the notion that reports of death by starvation are exaggerated, and to persuade her English readers that Irish widows and children, forced to eat seaweed to survive, deserved their support: 'Oh! if our English brethren could only have seen the famishing eagerness with which they devoured this wretched substitute for food [...], they would not wonder at the importunate cries for help which reach their ears from starving Ireland' (Hoare, 211).

While Carleton and Hoare were particularly concerned with convincing their English readers, in order to generate either new legislation or relief, many of the poets writing during the Famine had a different purpose or a different audience in mind. Furious that exportation continued during the Famine and that their countrymen had not risen up to prevent it, they sought to castigate both their colonial masters and their fellow Irishmen. Those writing for *The Nation*, the organ of the nationalist Young

Irelanders, hoped their poetry would be the means of inspiring an uprising. Thomas D'Arcy McGee testified to his horror at the Famine in a speech to the Irish Confederation in March 1848:

My heart is sick at daily scenes of misery. I have seen human beings driven like foxes to earth themselves in holes and fastnesses; I have heard the voice of mendicancy hourly ringing in my ears, until my heart has turned to stone and my brain to flint from inability to help them. I cannot endure this state of society longer (Phelan, 54).

His own impotence does not prevent him from haranguing the Famine victim who should have taken to arms; 'the Celtic blood runs palely, that once was winy red!' he charges in 'The Woeful Winter' (Morash 1989: 200). For McGee, the fate of Ireland is in the balance; the Famine is making of a once fertile land 'a wide, inhuman desert', and unless her men fight back, Ireland will cease to exist:

Death reapeth in the fields of Life, and we cannot count the corpses;
Black and fast before our eyes march the busy biers and hearses;
In the laneways, and in highways, stark skeletons are lying,
And daily unto Heaven their living kin are crying –
'Must the slave die for the tyrant – the sufferer for the sin –
And a wide, inhuman desert be, where Ireland has been;
Must the billows of oblivion over our hills be rolled,
And our Land be blotted out, like the accursed lands of old?'
(*'The Famine in the Land'*, Morash 1989: 194)

McGee's *Nation* colleague Jane Francesca Elgee, the future Lady Wilde, who wrote as 'Speranza', was equally convinced that the only solution was revolution. Her poems 'Signs of the Times', 'The Year of Revolutions' and 'France in '93' call

on Ireland to follow the example of Poland, France and Prussia in liberating herself. In a leading article in *The Nation* in 1848, while its editor, Charles Gavan Duffy, was under arrest for treason-felony, Speranza indicated how far she felt Ireland should be prepared to go: ‘One instant to take breath, and then a rising; a rush, a charge from north, south, east, and west upon the English garrison, and *the land is ours*’ (29 July 1848: 488). The speaker of her poem ‘The Enigma’, outraged that ‘the young men, and strong men, starve and die, / For want of bread in their own rich land’, calls on them to crush the tyrants:

Are your right arms weak in that land of slaves,
That ye stand by your murdered brothers’ graves,
Yet tremble like coward and crouching knaves,
To strike for freedom and Fatherland?

(Morash 1989: 217-18)

Speranza’s hard-line stance is intriguing, especially as her genteel Protestant background would have made her, for many of her readers, part of the ‘English garrison’ she urged them to overthrow. But the Famine inspired a shift of allegiance in many former supporters of the Union.

In July 1847 *The Nation* hailed the foundation of the new Protestant Repeal Association: ‘And do the landlords, the “gentry,” the “better classes,” the *English* garrison, as they were once, at last acknowledge a common nationhood *with* the tillers of the Irish soil, and *against* the English?’ (17 July 1847: 648). One of the Protestant Repeal Association’s founding members was Samuel Ferguson. Like McGee, Ferguson registers in his poem ‘Dublin’ the pain and impotence of the middle-class witness to Famine conditions:

Here men of feeling, ere they yet grow old,

Die of the very horrors they behold.

'Tis hard to sleep when one has just stood by

And seen the strong man of sheer hunger die;

'Tis hard to draw an easy, healthful breath,

In fields that sicken with the air of death;

(Morash 1989: 104)

Ferguson became honorary secretary to the cross-party Irish Council in 1847, and gave vent to his frustration at the government's negligence, claiming not only that many of those who had starved would have been saved if an Irish parliament had been in existence, but landlords and the gentry could also have avoided crippling taxes and rates:

[...] if, on the 1st of January, 1847, we had had a local legislature in this country, not only would monies have been raised adequate for preserving the lives of all her Majesty's subjects, who since that time, owing to the mismanagement of the Imperial Legislature, have lost their lives; but in applotting the taxation for that purpose [...] no one class in the community would have been made to suffer more than another (*United Irishman*, 13 May 1848: 203).

The Famine had proven the fallacy of the Union; if Ireland was truly part of the United Kingdom, her citizens would have been worth saving from starvation and financial ruin. While Ferguson was far from inciting rebellion, he was also a long way from his traditional enclave, and when he acted as defence attorney for the *Nation* poet Richard D'Alton Williams against the charge of treason-felony later that year, his transformation to ardent nationalist must have seemed complete.

Aubrey de Vere, son of a Co. Limerick landowner, nephew of the ex-Chancellor of the Exchequer Lord Monteagle, friend of Alfred Tennyson and Thomas Carlyle, might also have been defined as part of the 'English garrison'. But the 'stormy scorn' heaped upon Ireland during 'the hour of her sorest adversity' convinced him that he had more in common with his Irish countrymen (de Vere 1848: 259). Following his father's death in 1846, de Vere threw himself into the relief effort, astonishing friends and family with his energy and resilience. One of the scenes he witnessed is recorded in his *Recollections*; de Vere and two guests entered a deserted cabin in Kilkee:

Its only inmate was a little infant, whose mother was most likely seeking milk for it. On slightly moving the tattered coverlet of the cradle, a shiver ran over the whole body of the infant, and the next moment the dark, emaciated little face relapsed again into stillness. Probably the mother returned to find her child dead. Mr. Monsell burst into a flood of tears. Nothing was said; but a few days later, on Lord Arundel's return to England, the inspector at Kilkee received a letter from him enclosing a cheque for two hundred pounds to be added to the local relief fund (de Vere 1897: 250).

This scenario is instantly familiar to the reader of Famine literature. A character – often the protagonist, usually of a higher class – enters a cabin to find starving or diseased victims, usually nameless. As in de Vere's experience, the witness is distraught, and determined to do something in future to aid those who suffer; but for the individual s/he encounters in the cabin, little, perhaps nothing, can be done.

Kelleher argues that 'The individuation of famine through the portrayal of single victims is [...] a necessary and, on occasion, very effective strategy', adding that 'in the majority of famine representations, the "single individual", the victim of

famine who is the subject of a detailed description, is female' (Kelleher, 6). The image of mother and child locked together in death recurs in Famine literature; in *Frank O'Donnell* (1861), Frank enters a cabin and finds 'a poor woman dead, and two children sucking her breast' (Conyngham, 223), while in *The Love that Kills* (1867) a dying mother attempts to suckle her dead baby (Wills, II 278). In *Golden Hills* (1865) people are moved to tears by a mother who cradles her baby even in death: 'O love, stronger than death! O mother's instinct, more imperative than even Nature's clinging to life! How does the heart warm to it, and recognize the universal brotherhood!' (Walshe, 242-43) John Keegan's 'The Dying Mother's Lament', whose speaker mourns 'To see my ghastly babies – my babes so meek and fair – / To see them huddled in that ditch, like wild beasts in their lair' (Morash 1989: 59), is one of the few times the mother is given a voice; more frequently, Famine victims are objects to be viewed by wealthier survivors, whose response is privileged over the victims' plight.

In Trollope's *Castle Richmond*, Herbert Fitzgerald has a series of encounters with Famine victims which alter his perception of his own predicament. This novel of 'the Famine Year', which Trollope began writing in 1859, was his parting gift to Ireland, where he had lived since 1841: 'I am now leaving the Green Isle and my old friends, and would fain say a word of them as I do so. If I do not say that word now it will never be said' (Trollope 1989: 2). It was not an easy word for him to say. Trollope had lived through the Famine, but the years of the country's crisis had been prosperous ones for him personally. During the Famine he challenged reports he believed to be sensationalist, such as those of Sidney Godolphin Osborne in *The Times*, arguing that as his job as a Post-Office surveyor entailed extensive travel throughout Ireland, he would know better than Osborne the state of the country:

During the whole period of the famine I never saw a dead body lying exposed in the open air, either in a town or in the country. I moreover never saw a dead body within a cabin which had not been laid out in some sort of rough manner. Now it may be said that if I did not enter cabins, I could not see the horrid sights which were to be met within: but such a remark cannot apply to that which is said to have been of such frequent occurrence out under the open sky (Trollope 1987: 14).

Trollope's account is oddly equivocal, as Yvonne Siddle notes: 'Does he intend the reader to believe that he never saw a dead body lying in the open air, or that he specifically never saw an exposed, that is, uncovered, body?' (Siddle, 145). Trollope seems most concerned to stress that the bodies he did see had at least been 'laid out in some sort of rough manner', contrary to macabre reports that bodies were left to rot, or that the living and the dead lay in the same bed, or bodies had been eaten by rats or dogs – or worse, by their relatives.

Whether or not Trollope witnessed these 'horrid sights', Herbert sees both 'famished living skeletons' (Trollope 1989: 83) and dead bodies in cabins. After a walk with his fiancée, Lady Clara Desmond, in the same place Clara had been proposed to by his cousin and rival, Owen, Herbert is confronted by a woman and her five young children. It is mid-winter, yet two of the children are 'almost absolutely naked', while their mother is 'involved in a mass of rags which covered her nakedness', though 'you could hardly say that she was clothed' (189). An oddly extended examination of their bodies follows, which opens out into a consideration of the physical characteristics of 'the Celtic peasantry' in general. The narrator comments that in some districts, 'even after labour and sickness' peasants can be 'singularly beautiful', though this woman and her children are not 'comely'. The

chief difference appears to be ‘noble blood’, which had ‘produced delicate limbs and elegant stature’ in the peasantry of Clare, Limerick and Tipperary, while in Cork and Kerry ‘a want of noble blood had produced the reverse’ (189). Clara Desmond’s noble blood has resulted in the beauty that has made her the prize of both Fitzgerald men; this woman’s want of noble blood has made her ‘squat, uncouth, and in no way attractive to the eye’ (189). While Clara pities the woman and her children, but is unable to help them due to her own lack of funds, Herbert is obdurate: he ‘had learned deep lessons of political economy, and was by no means disposed to give promiscuous charity on the road-side’ (189). As Kelleher suggests: ‘The reference to promiscuity [...] attributes to the woman a lack of chastity in begging, a suggestion reinforced by reference to her nakedness’ (Kelleher, 51). Herbert has been attempting to persuade the reluctant Clara to name their wedding day, but his ‘first earnest supplication’ has been rejected: ‘She had many reasons, excellent good reasons, to allege why this should not be the case’ (Trollope 1989: 188). Now Herbert needs the ‘deep lessons of political economy’ to protect him from the supplication of the starving woman, but his many ‘excellent good reasons’ not to part with his cash are quickly exposed as inadequate.

For a member of the relief committee for Kanturk, Herbert seems strangely ignorant about the regulations. He tells the woman to take her children into Kanturk poorhouse, yet married women were not admitted to the poorhouse if their husbands were working, as this woman’s is. Due to government restrictions on outdoor relief, they would probably have been turned away empty-handed. Herbert suggests she should get a ticket for meal at the shop his family subsidizes, but the effect of this food is already evident in the condition of one of the children:

It was a child nearly two years of age, but its little legs seemed to have withered away; its cheeks were wan, and yellow and sunken, and the two teeth which it had already cut were seen with terrible plainness through its emaciated lips. Its head and forehead were covered with sores; and then the mother, moving aside the rags, showed that its back and legs were in the same state. 'Look to that,' she said, almost with scorn. 'That's what the mail has done – my black curses be upon it, and the day that it first come nigh the counthry.' (Trollope 1989: 191)

The narrator is now forced to admit that 'in spite of her ugliness', the woman's demeanour 'had in it something of tragic grandeur' (191). Significantly, she does not remain a nameless, apathetic victim; she identifies herself as Bridget Sheehy, 'one of the Desmond tinantry', and she is capable of exploiting the weaknesses of the gentry to save her children. It is only after Bridget has taunted him with a comparison with Owen that Herbert gives her some money: 'Come on, bairns. Mr Owen won't be afther sending me to the Kanturk union when I tell him that I've travelled all thim miles to get a dhrink of milk for a sick babe' (191). The love triangle and the Famine plot had seemed unconnected, but are now revealed to be enmeshed.

Shortly afterwards, Herbert discovers that he cannot inherit the Castle Richmond estate; his mother's former husband, believed to be dead, has reappeared, rendering his parents' marriage bigamous and Herbert and his sisters illegitimate. The 'noble blood' that separated him from Bridget Sheehy and her children is now worthless. Owen is the new heir, and Herbert fears he will also become Clara's husband. As Herbert heads to Desmond Court to tell Clara, he contemplates the new life ahead of him, in which he will have to work to earn his bread: 'If he had been only born to the struggle, he said to himself, how easy and pleasant it would have

been to him!’ (284). Almost immediately, he is confronted with ‘one of those gangs of road-destroyers who were now at work everywhere, earning their pittance of “yellow meal”’ (285). This is Fitzgerald land, and ‘the young master’ is immediately assailed by the complaints of ‘his own tenantry’: the meal is ‘the worst vittles iver a man tooked into the inside of him [...] it’s as much as I can do to raise the bare arm of me since the day I first began with the yally male’. The children suffer most severely: ‘their bellies is gone away most to nothing’. And, as Bridget Sheehy had argued, feeding a family is next to impossible: ‘Six mouths to feed; and what’s eight pennorth of yally male among such a lot as that; let alone the Sundays, when there’s nothing?’ (286) But Herbert, overwhelmed by his own dispossession, cannot listen to them: ‘He could not think of their sorrows; his own sorrow seemed to him to be so much the heavier. [...] Nothing is so powerful in making a man selfish as misfortune’ (287). He is not yet ready to admit that his private misery is outweighed by the national calamity.

Herbert’s final encounter with a Famine victim occurs on the day before he must leave Castle Richmond to begin his career in London; the chapter is called ‘The Last Stage’, and initially seems to refer to Herbert’s predicament. On his way to bid farewell to Clara, Herbert enters a cabin to shelter from the rain. Its wretched exterior ‘was as nothing to the nakedness of the interior’, and this nakedness is echoed in the cabin’s inhabitants: a woman who ‘had on her some rag of clothing which barely sufficed to cover her nakedness’, a baby clothed in ‘loose rags’, and the body of a dead child ‘stripped of every vestige of clothing’ (368-371). Unlike Bridget Sheehy, this woman (who remains nameless) has no resources of energy to persuade Herbert to help her, and her apathy perturbs him: ‘what could he do for one who seemed to be so indifferent to herself?’ (371). Indeed, the only effort she makes is ‘to hide her own

nakedness' when Herbert touches her baby's body. Kelleher describes this as 'the most horrific event' in the encounter: 'It is not difficult to recognize the intrusion, even violence, which his touch and gaze constitute; Herbert's power to cause embarrassment in a woman previously described as almost dead is horrifically clear' (Kelleher, 54). Yet Herbert's overwhelming feeling is impotence: 'He felt that he was stricken with horror as he remained there in the cabin with the dying woman and the naked corpse of the poor dead child. But what was he to do?' (Trollope 1989: 373) His solution is to offer the mother 'a silver coin or two' – though he knows she will 'die with the silver in her hand' – and to lay out the body of the dead child, Kitty, the only one of the three to be named, covering her with his silk handkerchief: 'At first he did not like to touch the small naked dwindled remains of humanity from which life had fled; but gradually he overcame his disgust, and kneeling down, he straightened the limbs and closed the eyes, and folded the handkerchief round the slender body' (373). Nothing can be done for the woman and her children; they were in the 'Last Stage' before Herbert arrived, and although he sends for help 'the mother and the two children never left the cabin till they left it together, wrapped in their workhouse shrouds' (374). Yet it is a salutary experience for Herbert, who is shaken out of his own selfishness:

Whatever might be the extent of his own calamity, how could he think himself unhappy after what he had seen? how could he repine at aught that the world had done for him, having now witnessed to how low a state of misery a fellow human being might be brought? Could he, after that, dare to consider himself unfortunate? (374)

It is only after this epiphany that Herbert is able to resign himself to his loss and his new life in London, and only then does the evidence emerge that his parents' marriage

had been legal after all. He is restored to his rightful place, not only as heir to Castle Richmond, but as chair of the local relief committee, whose ‘arrangements for soup-kitchens, out-door relief, and labour-gangs, might be taken as a model for the south of Ireland’ (489). The fate of Bridget Sheehy and her children, on the other hand, remains a mystery.

In Carleton’s *The Black Prophet* – in a chapter tellingly titled ‘A Picture for the Present’ – the priest and Nelly, wife of the Black Prophet, enter a cabin, to find a mother and her three children; the little girl is dead, the boy is starving, and the dying baby is desperately trying to suckle from its mother. The mother’s body is examined in almost microscopic detail:

There lay in the woman’s eyes – between her knit and painful eyebrows, over her shrunk upper forehead, upon her sharp cheek-bones, and along the ridge of her thin, wasted nose – there lay upon her skeleton arms, pointed elbows, and long-jointed fingers, a frightful expression, at once uniform and varied, that spoke of gaunt and yellow famine in all its most hideous horrors. Her eyeballs protruded even to sharpness, and as she glared about her with a half conscious, and half instinctive look, there seemed a fierce demand in her eye that would have been painful, were it not that it was occasionally tamed down into something mournful and imploring by a recollection of the helpless beings that were about her. Stripped, as she then was, of all that civilized society presents to a human being on the bed of death – without friends, aid of any kind, comfort, sympathy, or the consolations of religion – she might be truly said to have sunk to the mere condition of animal life [...] (Carleton 1847: 273).

The mother dies, whispering ‘hunger’, and only her son survives. Worse than her horrific emaciation – even her eyeballs are sharpened – is the suggestion of maddened

degeneracy which is only precariously held in check by maternal memory. In *Dick Massey* (1860), a mother calmly makes gruel by the fire in the same room with her two dead children (Russell, 37). Even worse, a mother in *Denis* (1896) snatches a sandwich from her emaciated child and crams it into her own mouth: ‘The men who looked upon her face, as her eyes turned again to the child she had robbed, shuddered with a chill horror, as if they had gazed upon the face of a Medusa’ (Field, 392). Hoare sadly notes that the ‘season of famine whose iron gripe loosed the bonds of even maternal love [...] caused the mother to snatch the scanty morsel from the thin white lips of her dying child’ (Hoare, 198-99).

All social bonds collapse in the face of extinction. Fathers abandon their children, and trample over them for scraps: in *The Love that Kills*, a previously devoted father drags his daughter outside the cabin to die so that he can eat their remaining food in peace (Wills, II 273-4). Carleton insists that even the most sensational cabin scenes in literature are not as horrific as the reality:

[...] so many as twenty-three human beings, of all ages and sexes, have been found by public officers, all lying on the same floor, in the same bed – if bed it can be termed – nearly one-fourth of them stiffened and putrid corpses. The survivors weltering in filth, fever, and famine, and so completely maddened [...] that all the impulses of nature and affection were not merely banished from the heart, but superseded by the most frightful peals of insane mirth, cruelty, and the horrible appetite of the ghoulish and vampire. Some were found tearing the flesh from the bodies of the carcasses that were stretched beside them. Mothers [...] threw their wretched children on the sides of the highways [...] whilst fathers have been known to make a wolfish meal upon the dead bodies of their own offspring (Carleton 1852b: II 34-5).

The claustrophobic proximity of the living and the dead, rather than providing a check to personal selfishness, entails the risk of contagion by cholera, typhus, even madness, and the dissolution not only of natural bonds but of identity. The famine victim is ‘an other who threatens to invade and take possession of the observer’s self, in part by virtue of its ineffaceable physicality’ (McLean, 122). The jaundiced skeletal figure of Famine is omnipresent: ‘the children were little living skeletons, wan and yellow’ (Carleton 1847: 178); ‘the yellow parchment-like skin drawn tightly over the protruding bones of the face’ (Brew, II 259); ‘a bony outline, over which was painfully dragged and stretched a casing of yellow leather, ghastly to behold’ (Field, 292). In Mangan’s ‘The Funerals’, the skeleton presides over a nightmare vision of ‘endless FUNERALS’:

And on each hearse there sat enthroned

A skeleton!

The FUNERALS showed him by a lurid gleam,

And round each stood, as ’twere enzoned,

Others, the like, so many a one

They might have peopled worlds of Dream!

(Morash 1989, 133)

The Famine body is even more terrifying when it is repeated, becoming ‘a gigantic and multitudinous Frankenstein’ (Carleton 1852a: II 88). These bodies pose a particular threat in their proximity to middle-class homes and workplaces: Carleton describes ‘crowds of excited skeletons proceeding from one gentleman’s house to another’ (Carleton 1852a: II 261), while in *Frank O’Donnell*, a crowd gathers outside a committee meeting: ‘Some were living skeletons, tottering with disease and weakness. Some looked like scarecrows, dressed up in rags, and moved by some

inward machinery' (Conyngham, 200). The bestial propensities of the Famine body are magnified in crowds: in *The Black Prophet* 'wild crowds' fight for food 'like so many hungry vultures about the remnant of some carcase which they were tearing, amid noise, and screams, and strife, into very shreds' (Carleton 1847: 150-51). In *The D'Altons of Crag* (1882) the wandering poor form 'strange and stricken groups – with skeleton arms outstretched in mute supplication, and staring eyeballs – and parched lips drawn tightly over the hungry teeth – the very wild beast of the famished animal eclipsing in a horrid mockery the image of the soul within' (O'Brien, 30). For many Irish writers, this bestial, cannibalistic, skeletal figure represents everything Ireland had lost in the Famine. The editor of *The Nation*, Charles Gavan Duffy, recently released from prison after the failure of his prosecution for treason-felony, and deeply depressed by the fiasco of the failed Rising of 1848, was horrified by the 'new race' created by the Famine:

We saw on the streets of Galway crowds of creatures more debased than the Yahoos of Swift – creatures having only a distant and hideous resemblance to human beings. Grey-haired old men, whose idiotic faces had hardened into a settled leer of mendicancy, and women filthier and more frightful than the harpies, who at the jingle of a coin on the pavement swarmed in myriads from unseen places; struggling, screaming, *shrieking* for their prey, like some monstrous and unclean animals (Duffy, 121).

The question posed by many of these texts is: what caused the Famine? The answer is never *Phytophthora infestans*, the blight that rotted the potatoes. For some, the government is clearly to blame, particularly in allowing exportation from a starving country. The blight and famine are 'powerful engines of the state to uproot millions of the peasantry, to preserve law and order, and to clear off surplus

population, and to maintain the integrity of the empire' (Conyngham, 194).

Merchants and millers are blamed for hoarding and speculating. Elsewhere, it is the fecklessness of Irish landlords which has brought the country to this pass. The titles of several novels focus on the estate, often debt-ridden and encumbered – *The Squanders of Castle Squander*, *Castle Richmond*, *Castle Daly*, *The Chronicles of Castle Cloyne*. The fate of the estate is symptomatic of the state of Ireland: 'In point of fact, [the Squanders'] woful decline and desolation resembled the decline and desolation of the country' (Carleton 1852a: II 249). In *Castle Daly* (1875) and *Castle Cloyne*, the estate is lost during the Famine, and only regained when the heir marries an English heiress; in *Frank O'Donnell*, Frank, who has been evicted from his own farm during the Famine (and whose mother dies as a result), returns rich from America and buys the whole estate. Margaret Brew feels obliged to defend the landlords with a dual plot, one involving the heir to Castle Cloyne, Hyacinth Dillon, the other the peasant Oonagh MacDermott, 'to show how universal was the action of the Famine, and how impartial in its effects' (Brew, I viii).

While there are disputes about the human agents, there is almost unanimous acceptance that the Famine represented the will of God. As Peter Gray has shown, this belief was pervasive, even among Government officials; the Home Secretary, Sir James Graham, wrote to the Prime Minister, Sir Robert Peel, in October 1845:

The sword, the pestilence, and famine are the instruments of [the Almighty's] displeasure; [...] he gives the word: a single crop is blighted; and we see a nation prostrate, stretching out its hands for bread. These are solemn warnings, and they fill me with reverence; they proclaim with a voice not to be mistaken, that 'doubtless there is a God, who judgeth the Earth' (cited in Gray, 99).

Regardless of their political or religious affiliations, writers seem equally convinced that the Famine was divine retribution, but differ in their interpretation of the sin and its perpetrators. The Famine is a ‘plague sent by a wrathful God’ on idolatrous Catholics (Percival, 151), a ‘wonderful blow to priestly tyranny in Ireland’ (‘An Irishman’, 17). In *Irish Diamonds* (1864), *Frank O’Donnell* and *The D’Altons of Crag*, it is an opportunity for martyrdom, and Catholic families starve rather than sell their souls for food. The Famine is due to violence, ‘a judicial punishment for the bloodshed lying upon [the land]’ (Walshe, 293); or lack of violence: ‘God sent a curse upon the land, because her sons were slaves’ (‘Thanatos, 1849’, in Morash 1989: 165). The people in *Castle Daly* believe it is due to the murder of Squire Daly – a belief shared by his wife: ‘I, at least, can’t feel that all the suffering is unmerited. Crime calls down vengeance, and I can’t be surprised, that where such wrong has been done there should be misery’ (Keary, II 83-4). In *The Black Prophet*, the suffering of the Daltons is taken as a sign that the father is guilty of murder, but in Carleton’s novels, characters who speak of the Famine as a judicial punishment tend to be discredited. The miser Darby Skinadre, who is making a fortune selling meal, justifies his high prices as the will of God, while the monstrous agent Greasy Pockets gleefully welcomes this ‘blessed famine’ as an opportunity to ‘get rid, in a natural way, of “the super-abundant”’ (Carleton 1847: 53; 1852a: II 98). Yet the narrator of *Castle Squander* accepts that the Famine is providential, stressing only that the peasants are not the sole target:

[...] we dare not question the justice of Almighty Providence, who, for reasons with which we can never become acquainted, visited our people with such a transcendent infliction: not the people alone, however, but those at whose

hands they experienced so little consideration and sympathy (Carleton 1852a: II 111-112)

Trollope insists that the blight is ‘the work of God’, but denies it is a punishment: ‘For myself, I do not believe in such exhibitions of God’s anger’ (Trollope 1989: 65). Rather, it is a merciful purgation: ‘If this beneficent agency did not from time to time disencumber our crowded places, we should ever be living in narrow alleys with stinking gutters, and supply of water at the minimum’ (Trollope 1989: 68). Similarly, Thornley, the English agent of *Castle Daly* horrifies the warm-hearted Irish Anne O’Flaherty with his calm prediction of the extinction of her tenants: ‘As he talked, a huge, crushing, iron monster called Political Economy seemed to loom for the first time on Anne’s vision, before whose Juggernaut wheels the prosperity of her populous little valley must inevitably be ground to powder some day’ (Keary, I 151). Thornley turns out to have a heart, but he remains convinced that only the removal of the surplus population by Famine or emigration can renew Ireland.

Richard D’Alton Williams’s ‘Kyrie Eleison’ acknowledges that the Famine is the result of sin:

Black our fearful crime must be,
With triple scourges lashed by Thee –
Famine, Plague, and Slavery –
Parce nobis, Domine!

(Morash 1989: 237)

But his ‘Vesper Hymn to the Guardian Angels of Ireland’ foresees the land ‘from Famine and Plague and worse Thralldom emerging, / More purified, chainless, and chastened’ (Morash 1989: 240). De Vere, shortly to convert to Catholicism, explains

the Famine as part of Ireland's spiritual history; God's 'merciful severity' (de Vere 1848: 115) will transform Ireland into the Promised Land: 'Ireland! thy grave-stones shall become / God's Altar in the West!' ('The Desolation of the West', Morash 1989: 84). James Clarence Mangan has a more radical suggestion: in 'A Vision: A. D. 1848', the speaker is told in a dream that God sent the Famine to prepare Ireland for a final battle:

The Weak Ones must yield
Up in silence their breath
Ere the Last Scene of all.
For that scene must behold
But stern spirits and bold,
When the Lord takes the field.
Therefore Famine first came
And then Pestilence came,
And careered through the land
Like twin giants of Flame
(Morash 1989: 148)

For Speranza, the fight would continue even after death, and God's curse would fall on the English at last:

Now is your hour of pleasure – bask ye in the world's caress;
But our whitening bones against ye will rise as witnesses,
From the cabins and the ditches, in their charred, uncoffin'd masses,
For the Angel of the Trumpet will know them as he passes.
A ghastly, spectral army, before the great God we'll stand,
And arraign ye as our murderers, the spoilers of our land.

(‘The Famine Year’, Morash 1989: 222)

Those who represented the Famine in the fifty years following the catastrophe are in mourning for a lost world. Emily Lawless, born in the Famine’s first year, described it as ‘a black stream’ separating past and present: ‘Whole phases of life, whole types of character, whole modes of existence and ways of thought passed away then and have never been renewed’ (Lawless 1887: 401-02). Pre-Famine Ireland becomes an Arcadian memory: ‘skies were bright, and air was bland and warm’, Mangan claims in ‘The Famine’ (Morash 1989: 131), published in June 1849, shortly before his death. Post-Famine Ireland seems a wasteland, ‘some land of the dead, where human voice or footstep had not been heard for years’ (Carleton 1852b: I 16), drained by mortality and emigration, and haunted by the continuing threat of starvation, which emerges in novels about the famine of 1879-80 such as *Steadfast Unto Death* (1880) and *Rose O’Connor* (1881). At the end of the century, Louise Field’s *Denis* offers an elegiac view of a culture destroyed:

[...] something was gone for ever from the heart of the Irish people, something of gaiety and fun which never quite revived after the Black Forty-seven. [...] Dance and song and story were forgotten; the old harps were mouldering among the rafters of roofs; the old hand looms and spinning wheels stood still, and by degrees were broken up for firewood (Field, 413).

Unlike those writing about the Famine in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, these authors did not have the benefit of long hindsight, and their texts reflect deep anxiety about the country’s future – and their own. Mangan was one of the ‘Weak Ones’ who fell prey to cholera and malnutrition. In ‘To the Cholera’ Keegan pleads ‘be merciful, and spare / The trembling poet to his country’s cause’ (Morash 1989: 58), but he too was to die. McGee fled to America following the failed rising in 1848.

He later became a member of the Canadian parliament, and an outspoken opponent of militant Republicanism, so much so that when he was assassinated in 1868, it was assumed the Fenians were responsible. Carleton, who had based his reputation on his familiarity with the Irish peasantry, remained in Ireland, but retreated into the past and melodrama in his later novels, unnerved by the destruction of the world he knew (Fegan 2004). Trollope left, optimistically believing that Ireland had emerged from the dark days ‘a thriving people’ (Trollope 1989: 347), yet his final novel, *The Landleaguers* (1883), returns to Ireland to express his deep disappointment at the continuing violence there. The first generation of Famine writers may have been horrified, infuriated, shamed, or disillusioned by the Famine, but they were not silent about it, and nor were the writers who followed. Twenty-first century writers who set their novels during the 1840s are not discovering the Famine as literary material: it never went away.

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