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La grande famine en Irlande, 1845-1851

Foreword

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Foreword

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The Great Famine was the single greatest tragedy in Irish history. One million people died of starvation and disease in the five years after 1845, when the fungus *phytophthora infestans* struck Ireland for the first time, causing the blight which destroyed the potato crop on which the rural poor depended so heavily. In the decade from 1845, two million fled the country. The population of Ireland therefore fell by one third in that period: a loss on a scale more reminiscent of the medieval Europe of the Black Death than of the dynamic and hopeful Europe of 1848.

This terrible phenomenon had many dimensions, and in recent decades scholars have shown how it can and indeed must be seen from a wide array of perspectives: biological, demographic, geographical, political, economic, anthropological, administrative, cultural, literary, and no doubt still others. Comparisons are made with previous and later Irish famines; with hunger elsewhere in Europe in the nineteenth century; and with great Asian and African famines of the twentieth and, alas, the twenty-first centuries.

In many ways, the Famine marks a *caesura* in Irish history. Before it, Ireland's population was growing fast, and was roughly half that of England's, even though many warned that this was unsustainable. Afterwards, it fell in every decade from the 1850s to the census of 1961, where the population of the Republic stood at fewer than three million; it has since grown by more than half. The landless poor were by far the greatest victims of the Famine and as their place in Irish life became ever more marginal, as a consequence of death or emigration, Ireland's social structure changed. At the same time, many landowners' incomes fell sharply, undermining the economic viability of the landlord and tenant model and helping to set in train the emergence of a society of smallholding proprietors.

It has been persuasively argued that the shock of the famine, both demographic and psychic, led to the emergence of a deeply cautious and conservative society, one in which owning, and holding on to, the land became more than ever paramount, and in which there was little place for deviation from rigid social norms. This reinforced, and was in turn reinforced by, the emergence of a newly authoritarian and disciplined Catholic Church which assumed a role in Irish society that was effectively unchallenged until recently – with a wide range of consequences which today's Ireland is still seeking to understand and assess.

Another long-term consequence of the Famine was the acceleration in the decline of the Irish language. Irish-speakers, tending to live in the poorest parts of the country, were disproportionately numbered among the dead and among

emigrants. And, in turn, the demands of emigration led to a sharpened and entirely rational, if utilitarian, focus on the mastery of English.

Emigration was a well-established feature of Irish life well before the Famine, among both Catholics and Protestants. The great majority of US Presidents with Irish ancestors (from Andrew Jackson through to Barack Obama) were the descendants of pre-Famine Protestant emigrants. But the Famine added enormous and unstoppable momentum to this established trend. Irish emigrants from the 1850s onwards were more commonly Catholic and were to be found predominantly in the great and growing cities of the United States, Canada, Australia and Great Britain – New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, Boston, Montreal, Toronto, Sydney, Liverpool, Glasgow, Manchester, Birmingham, and London. They rallied around their religion, often fuelling tensions with Protestant majorities, and were both protagonists and victims of conflict between nativists and newcomers.

Pre-famine Ireland, however, unlike the great majority of other countries of emigrants, was already part of an (imperfect and incomplete) parliamentary democracy. So the Irish, also as English speakers, were well-placed to play an ever more important part in the municipal politics of their adopted homes.

Many emigrants, or at least their descendants, merged quickly into their new societies, but a substantial number remained deeply attached to Ireland. Organising themselves politically, many were deeply hostile to Great Britain, or more precisely to England. Emigrants and their descendants, above all in the US but also elsewhere, played a role in radicalising, indeed militarising, Irish nationalism. Of primary importance was the Irish Republican Brotherhood, a key organisation in modernising the physical force tradition and hence in pursuing the Rising of 1916 and the War of Independence.

On a less political note, emigrant communities became an enormous market for songs and stories of departure and exile. Sentimental ballads – by no means all written by Irishmen and women – enjoyed as much if not more success in New York as in Dublin.

Allowing for the enormous scale of the practical challenges created by the Famine, the failure of the authorities – both central, in London and Dublin, but also local – to do more to alleviate distress and save lives remains both a great stain on the record of British rule in Ireland and a source of continuing controversy. As we now know, famine is always a political as well as an agricultural problem. Though a majority of historians and commentators think it exaggerated and anachronistic to speak of genocide, there are some who vigorously argue that indeed the Famine can be so classified. Leaving aside questions of definition and intent, it is surely unimaginable that a similar disaster would have been allowed unfold on British soil. Dehumanised visions of the Irish peasantry were common, and in addition a *laissez-faire* economic liberalism created the intellectual framework within which Famine could be seen by some as an instrument – a blunt and terrible instrument, to be sure – for restoring socio-economic balance. It must also be recalled that many Irish people suffered little from the Famine, and indeed that some did well economically

as it raged. So blame cannot be conveniently confined to the British ruling class alone, even if the lion's share of it may be.

At the same time, the shame felt by many British people, and their generosity – and indeed the scale of help from elsewhere – ought not to be forgotten. Shortly after he became Prime Minister in 1997 – the 150th anniversary of Black '47, the worst year of the famine – Tony Blair made an official apology on behalf of the British Government. This was well-received in Ireland, though some in the UK questioned how meaningful such an apology could be after so long a time.

Irish governments have decided, despite the severe consequences of the economic crisis and the need for major cuts in spending, that Ireland should remain among the leading *per capita* donors of Official Development Assistance. One of the central themes of our development policy is the fight against hunger and malnutrition. The private generosity of individual Irish men, women and children, especially in contributing to emergency appeals connected to famines or natural disasters, is well documented. Many see it as the consequence of a sort of folk memory of our own great national trauma – but others question this, arguing instead that the strong traditions of Irish missionary activity around the world should be credited. Either way, there is no doubt that in public and political discourse the obligation to relieve contemporary suffering is now firmly linked to our Famine experience.

Linked to this question is the difficulty of interpreting the extent to which there remains in Ireland a true collective memory of the Famine. It has been noted that it was more extensively commemorated in the 1990s than in the 1940s – as it moved further and further into the past. Certainly in earlier periods the sheer scale of the catastrophe – linked to the fact that those most affected, the dead and the emigrants, had literally departed the scene – may have contributed to a desire to forget a complex, traumatic and for some shameful period. It was maybe easier at the time to celebrate episodes of rebellion and military valour. But now we are more acutely aware of the problems raised by commemorating the use of violence, however legitimate or legitimised; and at the same time there is a worldwide tendency to revive memories of the defeated and marginalised, and to acknowledge the suffering of victims.

We are also far more conscious of the enormous threats posed by environmental and ecological degradation. The Great Famine can be compared to those cases of environmental, economic and ultimately social disaster enumerated by Jared Diamond in his work *Collapse*, in many of which societies continued to engage and invest in practices which were with hindsight manifestly unsustainable.¹ The circumstances and policies which enabled and indeed required massive overdependence by Ireland's poor on a single crop fit that pattern.

Even this short reflection on some of the wider issues raised by consideration of the Famine underlines the richness and variety of the continuing debate. At the

¹ Jared DIAMOND, *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*, New York: Viking Press, 2005.

same time, precise and specific scholarship continues to add to our understanding of what actually happened, and where.

It is most significant that this important and complex topic has been prescribed for study within the framework of the highly prestigious *agrégation externe d'anglais*. French visitors of the period, not least Gustave de Beaumont, Toqueville's travelling companion in America, who travelled to Ireland in the 1830s and perceptively analysed the precariousness of the food supply, and French scholars since then, have contributed significantly to building up a deeper appreciation of the Famine's causes, course and consequences.² I salute the initiative of the publishers of *La Revue Française de la Civilisation Britannique* in proposing the preparation of a special edition devoted to the Great Famine, and to the excellent work of the co-editors, Anne-Catherine de Bouvier and Christophe Gillissen, in bringing together so distinguished a team of present-day contributors.

² Gustave de BEAUMONT, *L'Irlande sociale, politique et religieuse* [1839], ed. Godelaine CARPENTIER, Villeneuve d'Ascq: CERIUL, 1990.