

THE IRISH FAMINE: A HISTORIOGRAPHICAL REVIEW

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The great Irish famine of the 1840s and 50s resulted in over a million deaths from starvation and disease and witnessed the emigration of millions more. It has been estimated that Ireland lost an eighth of its population from 1846 to 1851. The fact that a disaster of this magnitude took place in relatively modern times is as surprising as the fact that it took place in a country that was part of the wealthiest empire in the world, Great Britain. However, with great power and wealth comes the paranoia that everyone is determined to take advantage of that prosperity. The British perception of the Irish peasantry was that their reliance on the potato had destroyed their work ethic and produced a society of lazy, indolent, and violent people. They also blamed the primitive landlord-tenant relationship for a backward agrarian arrangement. British policy and aid for the Irish through the calamity was thus restrained by their concern that the Irish would not progress in reforming their society and would only take advantage of any assistance. Historian Christine Kinealy asserts that “from the beginning, members of the British government saw themselves as being involved in a crusade to bring about social changes in Ireland, the enemies being the recalcitrant landlords on one side, and the perfidious potato on the other.”¹

Research on Anglo-Irish relations could fill a library, but it was not until the sesquicentennial commemoration that an abundance of research on the famine was published. In spite of the enormity of the disaster, the historiography of the famine was extremely sparse up until the last decade. This paper seeks to understand what compelled historians to first neglect, then revise, and ultimately return to a nationalist interpretation of the Irish famine.

Despite a cast of colorful characters, a tragedy of epic proportions, and endless stories of personal suffering that any Hollywood screenwriter would envy, the Irish famine received very little scholarly attention until the middle of the twentieth century. Historian James Donnelly’s research discovered that the scholarly journal *Irish Historical Studies*, founded in 1938, published only five articles related to the famine in the first fifty years of its existence. He

Lori Henderson, a senior from Charleston, Illinois, wrote her paper for Dr. Michael Shirley’s Fall 2005 session of HIS 2500, Historical Research and Writing. Her work earned first place in the Social Science Writing Award competition in the Spring of 2006.

¹Christine Kinealy, *This Great Calamity: The Irish Famine* (Dublin: Gill & MacMillan, Ltd., 1994), 40.

also notes that the journal *Irish Economic and Social History* offered no improvement on that record.² This period of neglect for an event that altered the social and economic fabric of Ireland is puzzling. However, some historians have developed intriguing theories as to why the famine was literally ignored by historians in the century following the disaster.

Hazel Waters theorizes that the famine “has been little remarked by historians mostly concerned to distance themselves from charges (powerful but not validated) that government policy amounted to deliberate genocide.”³ The claims of genocide by the British government were a recurring theme of the Irish nationalist response to the ineffective and limited aid received during the famine. Further discussion of these claims and how they have influenced the historiography will be covered later in this paper. Waters may have a valid point; however, Christine Kinealy develops the theory further with her claim that Irish historians have enforced a “self-imposed censorship” for fear of providing “ideological bullets to the Irish Republican Army.”⁴ Further echoing Waters’ theory is Cathal Portier’s argument that the difficulty for historians resides in the fact that folklore is often the primary storyteller of the famine. The claim is that historians fear folklore carries a nationalist bent so severe that accurate and unbiased research cannot be accomplished.⁵

Irish historian Colm Toibin takes a social approach to the neglect and speculates on how much guilt plays a factor:

[T]o suggest that it was merely England or Irish landlords who stood by while Ireland starved is to miss the point. An entire class of Irish Catholics survived the Famine; many, indeed, improved their prospects as a result of it, and this legacy may be more difficult for us to deal with in Ireland now than the legacy of those who died or emigrated.⁶

Toibin claims that Irish silence might possibly be traced to Irish guilt as well as a fear of offending the farmers and traders who had gained wealth and prestige at the expense of human suffering.

²James Donnelly, Jr., *The Great Irish Potato Famine* (England: Sutton, 2001), 12.

³ Hazel Waters, “The Great Famine and the Rise of Anti-Irish Racism,” *Race and Class* 37, 1 (1995): 95.

⁴ Mary Daly, “Review Article: Historians and the Famine: A Beleaguered Species,” *Irish Historical Studies* 30, (1997): 591-2, quoting Christine Kinealy, *A Death Dealing Famine: The Great Hunger in Ireland* (London: Pluto Press, 1997), 1.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 599.

⁶ Colm Toibin and Diarmuid Ferriter, *The Irish Famine: A Documentary* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2001), 6.

Whatever theory historians adhere to regarding the lack of scholarly research, it is clear the interruption of that silence began with the centenary commemoration and exploded by the sesquicentennial. The first century following the famine found historians paralyzed by the nationalist sentiment of Irish folklore, afraid of stoking further nationalist unrest, and reluctant to offend those who benefited from the calamity. The second century began a new chapter in the historiography, and its title was revisionism.

To commemorate the centenary of the famine, Eamon de Valera, serving as Taoiseach⁷ of Ireland in the 1940s, offered funding for the purpose of researching and producing a scholarly book on the famine. The result was *The Great Irish Famine: Studies in Irish History 1845-52*. Published in 1956, too late for the 1945 commemoration, it has become the flagship for the revisionist school. Revisionism absolves the British government and lays the blame on Ireland's dependence on the potato, Irish landlords, and a backward agricultural economy. In the foreword of *The Great Irish Famine*, K.B. Nowlan writes,

Modern research on the administrative and political backgrounds to the Great Famine reveals more clearly the limitations of men in office who were unwilling to rise or incapable of rising effectively above the economic conventions of their day and struggling with no outstanding success against a disaster that had its roots deep in Irish history. The disaster originated in that ordering of human affairs which condemned so many to a life-long dependence on a single crop. The potato economy, the primitive state of agriculture and the bad relations between landlord and tenant were but different expressions of the same evil, poverty.⁸

The historian James Donnelly, an American of Irish descent, claims that the editors "appear to have been quite anxious to avoid reigniting old controversies or giving any countenance to the traditional nationalist-populist view of the famine."⁹ In order to accomplish this task, it has been necessary for revisionists to approach the famine clinically and analytically, in the process extracting the emotional and national component. Professed critic of the revisionist school, Brendan Bradshaw claims that "the trauma of the famine reveals, perhaps more tellingly than any other episode of Irish history, the inability of practitioners of value-free history to cope with the

catastrophic dimensions of the Irish past."¹⁰ It has been noted that de Valera was disappointed in the project that he funded and envisioned. Irish historian, Cormac O'Grada remembered that "he expressed unhappiness with the book, presumably because it seemed to downplay those aspects of the tragedy that had been etched in his own memory."¹¹

If de Valera was disappointed in the revisionist classic, in 1962 he was able to acknowledge and celebrate a book that took a great leap in the opposite direction. Cecil Woodham-Smith's *The Great Hunger: Ireland 1845-49* was a bestseller at the time of publication and still sells well to this day. Although Woodham-Smith was not a professional historian, her work involved over ten years of research. O'Grada credits her as a "formidable researcher."¹² Revisionists dismissed her work as too emotional and passionate to be taken seriously as a scholarly work. In reality, Woodham-Smith revived the nationalist interpretation, placing the blame for the famine back at Britain's door.¹³ While the revisionists were chagrined at the publication and subsequent commercial success of her book, de Valera finally had the book he had hoped for. President of Ireland at the time, he held a dinner in her honor and she was awarded an honorary degree from the National University of Ireland. Toibin reflects on Woodham-Smith's legacy:

Her crisp style belongs to another age. It is full of certainties and judgments about matters which have since been surrounded with qualifications and altered by shifting perspectives. She presents pen portraits of her protagonists of a kind that is now frowned upon. Her work is readable- something which later historians of the Famine have tried hard not to be. If she relies too much on the study of personalities, her command of detail, her insistence on the cruelty of those in charge and the misery of those who suffered, and her ability to structure the narrative, account for the book's extraordinary impact. Reading *The Great Hunger* is like reading Georgian poetry.¹⁴

Despite the success of *The Great Hunger*, the revisionist school was not prepared to give up their cause. First published in 1986, Mary Daly's book, *The Famine in Ireland*, generated criticism that provoked new debate and controversy among historians. Toibin describes the

⁷ Taoiseach is a title given to the head of government of the Republic of Ireland and the leader of the Irish cabinet.

⁸ R. Dudley Edwards and T. Desmond Williams, eds., *The Great Famine, Studies in Irish History* (New York: University Press, 1957), xi.

⁹ Donnelly, *The Great Irish Potato Famine*, 17.

¹⁰ Brendan Bradshaw, "Nationalism and Historical Scholarship in Modern Ireland," *Irish Historical Studies* 104, (1989): 340.

¹¹ Toibin and Ferriter, *The Irish Famine*, 9.

¹² *Ibid.*, 29.

¹³ Donnelly, *The Great Irish Potato Famine*, 14.

¹⁴ Toibin and Ferriter, *The Irish Famine*, 29.

book as “short on emotion, long on detail and cautious examination...careful not to blame the administration.”¹⁵ In his scathing attack on revisionism, Bradshaw does not spare Daly’s work of criticism. He accuses her of isolating herself from the trauma of the disaster and in the process isolating her audience. Bradshaw writes that her method consists of “assuming an austere clinical tone, and by resorting to sociological euphemism...thus cerebralising and thereby de-sensitizing the trauma.”¹⁶ Donnelly maintains that Bradshaw’s “criticisms appeared to be especially relevant to the general scholarly approach to the great famine. That approach had long been almost entirely dismissive of the traditional nationalist interpretation, which laid responsibility for mass death and mass emigration at the door of the British government, accusing it of what amounted to genocide.”¹⁷ Bradshaw’s essay arrived just in time for the commemoration of the sesquicentennial of the famine, a commemoration that would yield a plethora of new research and publications. Christine Kinealy has been quoted as claiming that “more has been written to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the Great Famine than was written in the whole period since 1850.”¹⁸ This last decade of work has seen historians attempting to un-revise the revisionists, address the issue of blame, and assess Britain’s role in managing the disaster. In essence, a return to the nationalist interpretation has been necessary to engage in a more balanced and open dialogue to examine the disaster in Ireland in the 1840s.

The sesquicentennial of the famine was surrounded by a hoopla of concerts, speeches, monuments and, in the process, it began a new chapter in famine historiography. For years, revisionists had worked hard to absolve Britain of blame for the famine. In an ironic twist of fate (or perhaps savvy political maneuvering), British Prime Minister Tony Blair offended all sentiment of revisionist theory with an apology. Below is an excerpt of Blair’s speech delivered by Irish actor Gabriel Byrne in 1997:¹⁹

The Famine was a defining event in the history of Ireland and of Britain. It has left deep scars. That one million people should have died in what was then part of the richest and most powerful nation in the world is something that still causes pain as we reflect on it today. Those who governed in London at the time failed their people through

¹⁵ Ibid., 11.

¹⁶ Brendan Bradshaw, “Nationalism and Historical Scholarship in Modern Ireland,” *Irish Historical Studies* 104, (1989): 341.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Mary Daly, “Review Article: Historians and the Famine: a Beleaguered Species,” *Irish Historical Studies* 30, (1997): 599.

¹⁹ Blair was unable to attend the event and commissioned the Irish performer to deliver his words.

standing by while a crop failure turned into a massive tragedy. We must not forget such a dreadful event.²⁰

Of course Blair’s apology stirred a generous amount of controversy but it provides an appropriate starting point for the journey that witnessed a return to the nationalist interpretation in the historiography of the famine. After a century of neglect, there is no denying that there are a good number of scholarly works now available dealing with the Irish Famine. There is also no denying that these works include the nationalist interpretation; therefore, at this point we will examine the compelling evidence that those historians relied upon to produce their work.

In recent works, historians point to the British ideologies of providentialism and moralism, along with how these attitudes resulted and justified the limited aid and disastrous policies by the British government. The ideology of providentialism espoused that the famine disaster was the work of divine providence; the potato blight, in other words, was a result of God’s plan to reform Irish society. Moralism naturally follows providentialism in the belief that the Irish suffered a moral deficiency of character, therefore calling upon them the wrath of God in the form of famine. James Donnelly contends that Charles Trevelyan, an influential policy maker and head of the treasury during the famine, was a proponent of these ideologies.

Trevelyan was identified not only with providentialism and laissez-faire but also with what has come to be called moralism- the set of ideas in which Irish problems were seen to arise mainly from moral defects in the Irish character. Trevelyan and other moralists, who were legion, believed passionately that slavish dependence on others was a striking feature of the Irish national character, and that British policy during the famine must aim at educating the Irish people in sturdy self-reliance.²¹ Underlying these ideological beliefs was the ultimate tool for disaster for the Irish people: racism.

Middle-class public opinion in Britain at the time of the famine served to influence government policies. Public opinion was distributed to the masses by London’s newspaper, *The Times*. Kinealy claims that the *Times* “was the most influential newspaper of the day” and that it “had an impact on parliamentary and public opinion.” However, she also asserts that “much of the information upon which these stories were based was supplied by Wood and Trevelyan who used the powerful medium to their own advantage.”²² The racist attitudes of the British toward the Irish are overwhelmingly played

²⁰ Christine Kinealy, *The Great Irish Famine: Impact Ideology and Rebellion* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 1, quoting Prime Minister Tony Blair.

²¹ Donnelly, *The Great Irish Potato Famine*, 20.

²² Christine Kinealy, *This Great Calamity: the Irish Famine* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1994), 105.

out in newspapers as well as cartoons such as *Punch*. A reproduction of a *Punch* cartoon is featured in Donnelly's study, titled *The English Labourer's Burden*, which portrays a very simian-like Irish character grinning atop a humble, noble, and miserable Englishmen's shoulders.²³ What are harsh words for the consciousness of modern readers trained in the verse of political correctness, the *Times* printed such text as, "we have to change the very nature of a people who are born and bred, from time immemorial, in inveterate indolence, improvidence, disorder, and consequent destitution."²⁴

Many historians have devoted entire studies to the issue of racism during the famine. Among them, Michael de Nie's article, "The Famine, Irish Identity, and the British Press," focuses on the issue of race and the failings of the British government. Even in the early years of the famine, de Nie notes that the *Times* was already setting a precedent of otherness and racism. In September of 1846, the *Times* stated that "They have come amongst us, but they have carried back neither our habits or our sympathies, neither our love of cleanliness nor our love of comfort, neither our economy nor our prudence. Is this distinctive character capable of subjugation or change?"²⁵

De Nie finds that it "is interesting that even in this plea for empathy the Irish were held to be to blame for the cultural distance between the two peoples. They were incomprehensible because they had failed to Anglicize themselves." He concludes that by employing racism the British people accomplished "self-justification by projecting the blame for Irish suffering onto the Irish themselves."²⁶ Edward Lengel has produced a book titled, *The Irish through British Eyes*, where he addresses the effect racist attitudes had on British policy making. Perhaps the most damaging policy for the relief of the Irish people was the amendment to the poor law in 1848 with the addition of the Gregory clause.

The Gregory clause prohibited anyone from seeking relief in the workhouses if they held more than a quarter of an acre of land. In essence, this law forced smallholders to give up their land before they could seek to feed their starving families. This policy was disastrous for the victims of the famine and was added to the arsenal of the nationalist cause that accused the British of intentional genocide. Donnelly writes of the poor laws defects being so "serious that they gave plausibility to charges (then and later) that there was genocidal intent at work." He also contends that Parliament recognized "its

enormous potential as an estate-clearing device." Gregoryism, as the clause came to be known, "became a byword for the worst miseries of the disaster- eviction, exile, disease and death."²⁷

With ample evidence pointing to the intentional limits on aid by the British government, the racist views of the British public, and ultimately the millions of deaths of Irish citizens only miles from the shores of the world's wealthiest nation, it is difficult to understand how the nationalist interpretation was ever lost to the historiography of the famine. It is even more perplexing as to how the disaster could be neglected for so many years. As we have learned from the theories on neglect, complex political and social conventions paralyzed historians and stifled any serious scholarly treatment of the famine until the centenary. One hundred years later, historians still felt compelled to distance themselves from the nationalist sentiments of the folklore and claims of genocidal intent by the British government. In order to accomplish this, a new school of thought was created, now known as revisionism. It took another fifty years to untangle the revisionist's model and ultimately open the debate and dialogue as to what went so wrong in Ireland during the 1840s.

²³ *Punch* cartoon as reproduced in Donnelly's *The Great Irish Potato Famine*, 120.

²⁴ *The Times* (London), 23 March 1847.

²⁵ Michael de Nie, "The Famine, Irish Identity, and the British Press." *Essays in History* 38 (1996) : 28.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Donnelly, *The Great Irish Potato Famine*, 102.