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Feast and Famine: Food and Nutrition in Ireland 1500-1920

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Clarkson's and Crawford's research at the Centre for Social Research and in this book builds on Kenneth H. Connell's pioneering studies of population and of Irish diet. Making use of demographic data, manuscript sources, parliamentary papers and local records, they contend that food and nutrition are mainstream matters in the study of Irish social history, and reiterate this via five main themes:

1. they examine the changes in patterns of eating and drinking over time and among social classes.
2. They trace the widening chasm between the diets of the top two-thirds of the population and the bottom one-third during the decades before the Great Famine.
3. They challenge the assumption that the Irish were a people born to famine arguing that, except in times of scarcity or famine, the Irish poor were well fed, and there were more good years than there were seasons of failure

4. They consider the relationship between food, nutrition and health.

5. They question why food and drink did not figure more prominently among the business of legislators sitting in Dublin or London.

The Irish diet of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was reflective of their cattle economy: meat and milk products for the gentry and meat scraps, offal and milk products for the poorer Irish. They had long cultivated cereals and legumes. Potatoes made their appearance during this time, but they were meant only to supplement other foods, and were not intended to be the primary, indeed the only, food source. Settlers record their disdain for some of the dietary practices of the native Irish, like bleeding cattle and mixing the blood with butter and salt. (The Irish resorted to this practice during the Great Irish Famine, and today one can observe Masai people of East Africa bleeding cattle for a food source.)

Post-Cromwellian settlements brought some changes based on population growth, the extension of settlement boundaries and labour surpluses that made it possible to move from a pastoral to a tillage economy. The commodification of food was also a feature of the seventeenth century. The population of Ireland rose from about 2 million in 1700 to about 8.5 million on the eve of the Famine (1845). As the population rose, incomes rose; however, the gap between rich and poor widened, and that gap had consequences for the dietary habits of the Irish.

The authors identify two distinct diets in the Ireland of the nineteenth century. The diet for the wealthy consisted of large quantities of meat, fish, grain-based foods, dairy products, fruit and vegetables. They consumed tea and coffee, wine and spirits. The Irish poor ate potatoes, and the authors estimate that there were 3 million 'potato people' before the Famine, competing for smaller plots of marginal land. The traditional dairy diet of the Irish poor declined as milk was used to feed cattle or to make butter, two export products. The diversion of milk is the subject of the 'hospitality rewarded' type legend collected in the Irish countryside, which describes a woman who takes the milk her husband has saved for calves and gives it to poor children to drink. When her husband becomes enraged, he finds the milk miraculously restored.

Those who survived the Famine had more income to spend on food. There was not only more of it, there was the possibility of a more varied diet; however, it was a less nutritious diet. In *The Famine in Ireland* (published for the Dublin Historical Association by Dundalgan; Dundalk, 1986), Mary E. Daly noted that the post-Famine Irish changed from food producers to food consumers. She does not speculate on how much the change was caused by the Great Irish Famine itself, or by increased commercialisation prompted by the coming of the railways. Other explanations for the change from agricultural self-sufficiency point to the shift in agriculture from a tillage economy to a grazing economy, changes in the transfer of land from shared inheritance to inheritance privileging the eldest son, and to population mobility from the countryside to towns and via emigration.

Potato consumption declined as tillage land dropped by 50 per cent from the early 1860s to 1911. Cultivation of oats declined until the 1870s, and the traditional use of oatmeal dropped accordingly. Other grain-based foodstuffs increased, including those produced from Indian meal. Cheaper wheaten flour introduced baker's bread or shop-made bread into labourers' diet. By 1900 butter consumption was limited to skilled workers, unless an agricultural labourer was fortunate to own a cow.

E. Margaret Crawford brings her work as an historian of dietary aspects of the Famine to the chapter 'Food, Famine and Ireland'. The authors ask whether the Great Irish Famine was 'Ireland's destiny', and in doing so reject the Malthusian argument that famine was inevitable in places where the population growth exceeded the food supply. They conclude that famine was rather infrequent in Ireland partly because the potato held the Malthusian prophecy in check. When the fragile structure of the potato economy collapsed, famine followed. Using both the econometric model designed by Joel Mokyr, and Amartya Sen's theory of entitlements which distinguishes between lack of food and lack of access to food, the authors refute a Malthusian interpretation of the Famine.

While the authors argue that famine was not Ireland's destiny, they recognize the consequences of hunger and poor nutrition in their study of hunger-related diseases. They offer an historical survey of descriptions of Irish suffering from hunger that begins with Sir William Wilde, who dated the first mention of famine in Ireland to 'Anno Mundi 4019' in his 'Table of cosmical phenomena, epizotics, epiphitics, famines, and pestilences in Ireland' (in *The Census of Ireland for the Year 1851*). They offer descriptions from a wide range of eye-witness accounts: from Edmund Spenser's description of the Irish as 'anatomies of death', to Dr. Daniel Donovan's clinical descriptions of starvation in Skibbereen in 1848.

The observations and clinical descriptions make it possible to analyse the extent and severity of nutritional deficiency diseases like kwashiorkor and marasmus and the less fatal vitamin deficiency diseases: scurvy, xerophthalmia and pellagra. The major causes of death during the Famine were fevers like typhus and typhoid, which were caused when people were dislocated from their localities and crowded into workhouses or emigrant ships. Other infections like dysentery, measles, tuberculosis, smallpox, influenza and cholera preyed on people weakened from hunger. The effects of hunger were transmitted to the children of the post-Famine generation. Nineteenth- and twentieth-century quantitative and non-quantitative dietary surveys provide the data for the authors' analyses of Irish nutrition. (There is a single survey from the eighteenth century.) For earlier periods, the authors used the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century records of rations given to soldiers serving in Ireland.

The authors revisit the post-Famine shift in dietary habits again in their chapter 'Nutrition, Health and Demography', where they study the consequences of abandoning nutritious home-produced oatmeal and potatoes, for less nutritious shop-bought foods: tea, white bread, commercially-produced jam, biscuits, and fatty American bacon. The ten-fold increase in sugar consumption between 1859 and 1904 contributed to an increase in the rates of tooth decay and diabetes. However, the authors conclude it was climate, and not diet, that was responsible for diseases like the scourge of tuberculosis, which was only brought under control in Northern Ireland a decade after the Stormont government established a Tuberculosis Authority in 1941. Similarly, in the Republic of Ireland, Dr. Noel Browne, Minister for Health in the Costello coalition government, initiated a vigorous campaign to eradicate TB and it was these strategies which resulted in a sharp decline in the disease mortality rate in 1951.

When considering how food resources are spent, one must consider non-essential items in the household budget, such as tea. While the authors quote Jacinta Prunty's study of the Dublin slums to establish that by the 1820s 'tea was the general panacea of the Dublin poor', Maria Edgeworth's note to the phrase 'a raking pot of tea' in *Castle Rackrent* (1800), that describes the gossip around the teapot after a dance in the big house (a custom Edgeworth attributes to the washerwoman and the laundry-maid), suggests that tea drinking had been introduced to rural Ireland by the end of the eighteenth century. The American reformer Asenath Nicholson, who walked around Ireland in 1844-45 and who returned to contribute her own relief efforts during the Famine, disapproved strongly of tea which she believed produced the *delerium tremens*. While he was not a reformer, William Carelton's story, 'Barney Brady's Goose or Mysterious Doings at Slathbeg', in *Tales and Stories of the Irish Peasantry* (1864), preached against the social evils of tea drinking.

Clarkson and Crawford examine tea drinking in post-Famine Ireland, noting that while there was a good deal of regional variation, tea consumption per capita increased from 0.5 pounds to 2.2 pounds between the late 1830s and the early 1860s. Tea drinking spread in the 1870s and the 1880s, so much so that by 1904 the

Irish were consuming more tea than tea drinkers in the British Isles. Not only did the Irish drink large amounts of tea, but they also drank the best available tea. The cost of tea and sugar for the tea that they drank very sweet cost the Irish 20% of their food income in 1904. (This writer recalls a conversation with an Irish tea merchant in Galway in the mid-1960s who said that Connemara people bought the highest quality tea.) The social and economic history of tea drinking in Ireland certainly invites further research.

The authors conclude their study by asking why government efforts in matters of food and nutrition were fragmented. They look at such government policies as food-related revenue (duties on sugar, tea, coffee, wine and spirits), and they trace the legislative history of the Assize of Bread in Ireland which originated in medieval Ireland with local assizes that controlled the standards (price, weight) of staples like bread, and which passed to parliament in the eighteenth century. Parliament was also concerned with adulterated food and passed legislation, including the Bread Act of 1838, and a series of food and drug acts in 1875, 1879 and 1899.

The authors' discussion of government intervention of course looks at the government's relief efforts in Ireland. They review government intervention during earlier famines, including the embargo on food exports from Ireland during the 1741 famine; relief and public works to the Aran Islands in 1822; and the 1838 and 1845 Poor Laws. They conclude that the government's response to the Great Irish Famine was a problem of scale:

The debate of the adequacy of famine relief overlooks the fact that the Great Famine was the first occasion that the central government attempted on a large scale to deal with mass and prolonged distress caused by hunger. It did so, moreover, in a philosophical climate that rendered its interventions tardy and insufficient.

On the matter of food leaving the country, they suggest that had the food been retained in Ireland, entitlement would have still been circumscribed and many of the poor Irish would have found such food inaccessible. In the absence of government initiatives, private organizations stepped in to provide for the poor. The Quakers' lead in these efforts is well-documented, but other relief associations also came to the aid of the Irish. Indeed, the Great Irish Famine raised the question still debated today in works like Janet Poppendieck's *Sweet Charity? Emergency Food and the End of Entitlement* (Penguin; London, 1998), which argues that charitable organizations have contributed to America's failure to grapple in a meaningful way with poverty.

Were Clarkson and Crawford to extend their study beyond partition until the end of the twentieth century -- and this reviewer hopes they will -- they would necessarily explore the differences in matters of food and nutrition between those living in Northern Ireland and those living in the Republic. The benefits of the welfare state improved standards of living in the north after World War II. While the government of the Republic of Ireland experienced some major successes, such as the eradication of tuberculosis, many welfare services in the Republic of Ireland continued to be provided by religious orders or charitable societies. Caitríona Clear has demonstrated in *Women of the House. Women's Household Work in Ireland, 1922-1961* (Irish Academic Press; Dublin, 2000), that the Irish Countrywomen's Association promoted education about better nutrition among its members, while the Irish Housewives' Association lobbied for a school lunch program and were attacked in some quarters as a communist front for doing so.

Thus, there is much more to say on the fascinating subjects of food and social history in Ireland, but *Feast and Famine* is a brilliant beginning.

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