

A Death-Dealing Famine: The Great Hunger in Ireland

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Not long ago Cormac Ó Gráda lamented the dearth of scholarly writing about the Great Famine. Since then the drought has been broken by a deluge. Some outpourings are far from scholarly; some fall into the category of what D.H. Atkinson has recently described as "Famine porn" as their authors scour the lexicon of shocking vocabulary to arouse our indignation. But there are also good local studies and collections of contemporary documents, a few fine reflective essays, and some carefully crafted monographs, including Christine Kinealy's 1994 volume, *This Great Calamity*.

Her new work, *A Death-Dealing Famine*, is a curate's-egg sort of a book. I am not sure for whom it is intended. Dr Kinealy seems to be striving to achieve two things simultaneously. At one level she assumes the role of the Roy Foster of Famine history and at another the mantle of a modern Cecil Woodham-Smith. She will not like the first description, for Foster is the arch-revisionist, not a species that finds favour with Dr Kinealy, since revisionists seek to remove blame from considerations of Ireland's past and Kinealy is very strong on blame. But just as Foster's *Modern Ireland 1600-1972* is an excellent synthesis of a bigger story, so *A Death-Dealing Famine* brings together much of the recent writing on the Famine. Within its limits it is very successful. It is based on extensive reading and the end-notes are a rich source of primary and secondary references. For students commencing their studies of the Great Famine, *A Death-Dealing Famine* can take its place besides other introductions, such as the monograph by Mary Daly and the essays edited by Cathal Pórtéir.⁽¹⁾

Dr Kinealy never explicitly aspires to emulate Mrs Cecil Woodham-Smith, but she shares with her a sense of

outrage at what the government of the United Kingdom failed to do to alleviate the sufferings of the Great Famine. Woodham-Smith's villains are Kinealy's villains; and like Woodham-Smith, her interpretation of events is coloured by what ought to have happened rather than by what actually did take place. Unfortunately, the writing is limp and has none of the vigour of Woodham-Smith's. I cannot imagine any reviewer of *A Death-Dealing Famine* describing it, as Professor Dennis Brogan did of *The Great Hunger*, as "a moving and terrible book. It combines great literary power with great learning."

Dr Kinealy's work poses the question whether a comprehensive history of the Great Famine that is balanced but not anodyne can ever be written. There are two major difficulties to overcome. The first, that I have already touched on, is "the tradition of telling the 'story of Ireland' as a morality tale" (the words are Roy Foster's). The urge to do so is particularly strong in Famine historiography. Recently it has taken the disconcerting form of setting out one's pedigree for public inspection. Thus Terry Eagleton, in *Heathcliffe and the Great Hunger*, tells us that all four of his grandparents were Irish immigrants and that his mother was born into "the Irish community of the tiny Lancashire town of Bacup."⁽²⁾ Likewise Christine Kinealy acknowledges her debt to "my Irish grandparents who never had a chance to be buried in the country of their birth", and she thanks "my beloved Wicklow collie, Trot ...". Should I make clear that I am London-born, as far as I know I have no Irish antecedents, but I have lived half my life in Belfast and have one Belfast-born son and two Belfast-born cats?

The purpose of all this ancestor display is, I presume, to make the point that historians are prisoners of their environments and cannot write history objectively. Dr Kinealy's view is unambiguous. "Fundamentally the concept of value-free history, whilst noble in its intentions, is flawed in its execution. In striving for objectivity, that very purpose itself violates the concept, as the quest reflects the writer's own value-system and is set in the context within which the historian is writing (p.2)." In plain English, all history is subjective polemic. Such silliness was robustly refuted by Geoffrey Elton thirty years ago.⁽³⁾ Of course, historians have less than complete knowledge of the past, simply because the events that interest them happened then and not now and motives and causes have to be deduced from outcomes. But this applies to all writing of history, not just Irish history. As for subjectivity, historians are no more prisoners of their environments than are natural scientists.. To possess an Irish ancestry is not a qualification for writing good Irish history. The only requirement is a respect for the fundamental principles of the historian's craft, which are to be faithful to the evidence and to interpret that evidence honestly and fairly.

The greater challenge facing an historian attempting a comprehensive account of the Great Famine is that any famine is a tissue of complex social, economic, political and psychological strands. Famine affects society at large. It may or may not result in the death of men, women and children, who may starve because they have no food or, more commonly, die from diseases made worse by severe malnutrition. But such sufferings are not inevitable. Dr Kinealy's title - which is a borrowing from Daniel O'Connell - implicitly recognises that famine need not be "death dealing", but she does not explore with any rigour the circumstances that turn famine - i.e. a severe shortage of food - into mass starvation and death. She offers no definition of famine and makes no use of theoretical writings on famine, such as those by David Arnold and Amartya Sen that would have clarified these issues.⁽⁴⁾

Arnold draws a useful distinction between event and structure. The "event" triggers off a famine. It may be war, frost, flood, drought, pestilence or, in the Irish case in the 1840s, *phytophthora infestans*. Dr Kinealy describes the potato blight briefly but adequately, in the process partly acquitting the lumpen of its reputation as a particularly dismal member of the potato family. However, an event precipitates a famine only when it lodges into some deep fissure of society.

By 1845 one-third or more of Ireland's people relied almost entirely on potatoes for food. The blight coming, not once, not twice, but in three seasons out of four, and intermittently thereafter, rotted the sinews of survival. Dr Kinealy outlines this straightforwardly, although her account of how the precarious dependence came about is woefully superficial. But there is a further step that needs exploring. For a collapse in food supplies to result in widespread starvation and death requires other fault lines in society. Was the shortfall so absolute that starvation was inevitable, whatever anybody tried to do about it? Or was

the problem, to employ the vocabulary of Sen, a failure of entitlements?

The notion of entitlements is a simple one. A person is entitled to food because he or she legally owns food, or owns the means of producing it, or possesses the income to purchase food, or otherwise can obtain food by lawful exchange. Society might also recognise its legal or moral responsibility to supply food to those people who have no food nor any lawful means of getting it. How does the entitlements analysis assist in our understanding of the Great Famine?

A few years ago Peter Solar used the entitlements approach to the Great Famine in a volume of essays to which Dr Kinealy was herself a contributor. His conclusion was that the loss of the potato crop in the seasons 1845-49 was so great that there was an absolute shortage of food in the country. He urged, nevertheless, that the idea of entitlements "be incorporated in a full analysis of the Great Famine". It would assist in examining the effects of rent demands, and the operation of the poor law and private charity on the destinies of the starving. "But", he continued, "whatever the value of this approach, it should be remembered that the major change affecting the entitlements of the Irish people in the late 1840s was a direct fall in income that took the form of far fewer potatoes being harvested."[\(5\)](#)

Had Dr Kinealy thought in these terms her treatment of relief policies, the grain trade and, indeed, culpability would have been so much stronger. She is good when describing policy. Her book is, in effect, a history of relief policies pursued by the Westminster government. She steers us through the turbid pools of policy shifts and judges the motives of those who held the fate of hungry people in their hands. Or did they? What could any legislator have done to disperse the putrid cloud that rotted the basic entitlements of one-third of Ireland's people? Dr Kinealy's answer is that government ministers and their civil servants could have done more. It is a fair charge, but it needs to be pressed home and not taken to be self-evident.

Consider the case for the defence. The course of the potato blight and the extent of crop failures were unpredictable. With hindsight we know the scale of the problem, but *post hoc* wisdom comes easily; the government in 1845-6 was floundering in the dark. As for the corn trade, to do more than tinker was difficult for practical as well as ideological reasons. The grain that was exported during the Famine was legally owned by producers or merchants; the starving masses possessed only a rotten mess of potatoes. Is it reasonable to expect the men of the 1840s to possess the degree of knowledge that we enjoy with hindsight, or to demand from them the value systems that we hold today?

Such defences can be dented, possibly even demolished. Uncertainty may well have reigned in late 1845 and early 1846. By the end of that year there was no doubt among informed opinion that Ireland was in the grip of a dreadful crisis. The public works had failed to maintain the people. The soup kitchens introduced in the early months of 1847 provide clear evidence that after two years of hunger the government had stumbled on the kind of relief - cooked food - that was effective. The closure of the kitchens in the summer and autumn of 1847 was a dangerous gamble with human lives, scarcely justified by a few healthy potato plants. As for entitlements, the government *had* interfered with the corn trade only a few years before the Great Famine. Adam Smith's famous justification of a free trade in corn written in 1776 had been set aside on several occasions. Every ear of corn and bag of flour that might have been stopped from leaving Ireland in the late 1840s, was one ear and bag that might have saved a life.

Both charge and counter-charge are clouded by Dr Kinealy's insistence on writing normative history: the history of what ought to have been done rather than what was done. Where there is scope for differing judgements, she chooses the hard line. Take, for example, her treatment of Sir Charles Trevelyan. In August 1847 Trevelyan took a holiday after, in his own words, "two years of such continuous hard work as I never had in my life". Dr Kinealy comments, "as a third year of Famine commenced in Ireland, he toured France (p. 125)". The implication is clear; Trevelyan heartlessly put his own health above the health of tens of thousands of Irish men, women and children. But go back a year, to early 1846. Sir Randolph Routh, chief relief commissioner in Ireland, told Trevelyan that he was exhausted: "I cannot write more, as I am an invalid today and I intend to remain quiet tomorrow to recruit [i.e. to regain his health]". Trevelyan replied: "I hope to hear tomorrow that you have got rid of your indisposition - we have not time to be ill nowadays."

[\(6\)](#)

Routh and Trevelyan crossed swords more than once. On 28th December 1846 (how many of us today work on 28th December?) the latter refused Routh's request to release food from the government's depots at below market prices: "If we make prices lower, I repeat for the HUNDRETH TIME, that the whole country will come upon us (quoted p. 82)." But Trevelyan had instructed Routh earlier in the year, this time using italics for emphasis, "... the people must not, *under any circumstances*, be allowed to starve." (7)

Who was the real Trevelyan? The answer is both. His holiday in 1847 did not make him a callous man, nor his energy in 1846 a caring man. Trevelyan was stiff and unbending, but a man doing his best according to his lights. Those lights were not our lights. The principles guiding policy towards Ireland in the 1840s were based on classical economic orthodoxy – the market will make all things good – and a conviction that the disaster was the will of God. Trevelyan adhered to both tenaciously.

No scholar endeavouring to write Famine history in all its aspects can be other than impressionistic about ideologies. Dr Kinealy sensibly avoids selective quotation and stresses that an allegiance both to market forces and the will of God left open a number of policy options. Her complaint is that Westminster always chose the ones that produced the worst results. She may be right, but she has not made her case convincingly.

A surprising weakness of *A Death-Dealing Famine* is its treatment of demographic matters. There are nearly forty references to mortality in the index, all of them brief and most incidental. Dr Kinealy repeats several times that at least one million people died between 1845 and 1851 (and another million emigrated), but she does not explain how these totals are derived. According to Dr Kinealy (p. 59), "no one died during the first year of shortages [1845-6]", which is plainly nonsense. On p. 63, the statement is elaborated: "no excess mortality was recorded during this time." This is better, but it obscures the fact that no mortality – neither normal nor excess – was officially recorded in Ireland until 1864. All mortality totals and rates before then are the constructions of historians. As for the effects of the Great Famine on marriage and fertility, there is no discussion at all. The treatment of emigration is scarcely any better. There is a section entitled "The Flight from Ireland: Emigration", on pp. 146-8, but it is largely concerned with the horrors of the coffin ships and the perils awaiting emigrants if they survived their journeys.

Does this lack of discussion matter? Not so much if Dr Kinealy's purpose is to write a history of policy; but it matters a great deal if *A Death-Dealing Famine* is intended as an account of a great disaster. The central characters in the Great Famine were those whose fleshless bones perished in the fields alongside their blighted potatoes or who were forced to flee Ireland to escape starvation. It was their suffering and their legacies that have shaped the history of Ireland. Trevelyan and his tribe are useful targets to throw mud at, but they were the spear-carriers in the dolefully unfolding pageant.

In the historiography of the Great Famine, famine as "Ireland's destiny" is a recurring thread, particularly among those who take a Malthusian view of the crisis. Insofar as Christine Kinealy shows her hand, she is not a Malthusian. There is a longish section (pp. 42-48) on "Pre-Famine Famines" that might suggest otherwise, but its purpose is to demonstrate "a long history of state involvement in famine relief". It is meant to emphasise that the state in 1845-9 could have behaved differently had it chosen to do so. But the section can equally be read as highlighting the uniqueness of the Great Famine and therefore the inappropriateness of earlier policies.

A question that Dr Kinealy avoids is whether Ireland was more prone to famine than other European countries. She has some useful things to say about the impact of the potato blight in the 1840s in Scotland and on the Continent; again the intention is to contrast the failure of the UK government to do much that was useful with more effective actions elsewhere. The famines that afflicted parts of Sweden, Finland and Russia later in the century are not mentioned.

I asked earlier whether it is possible to write a history of The Great Famine that is comprehensive, balanced and compelling. On the evidence of *A Death-Dealing Famine* the answer is no. Dr Kinealy is not clear about her purpose. She seemingly wants to synthesise, but instead she has written a morality tale. Its plot is policy and it has a cast of villains and victims. If I were certain that her book is intended to be a history, not of the

Great Famine but of famine relief, I would qualify my judgement, although I would then protest that the title is misleading. If *A Death-Dealing Famine* is meant to stir my indignation, then, for me, it fails, not because I have only English blood coursing through my veins, but because the language is flat and the methodology flawed. Still, as the curate said, "parts of it are excellent".

Notes

1. Mary Daly *The Famine in Ireland*, Dudalk, 1986; Cathal Porteir , ed, *The Great Irish Famine*, Dublin, 1995.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Terry Eagleton, *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger: Studies in Irish Culture*, London and New York, 1995, p. x.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. G.R. Elton, *The Practice of History*, London and Sydney, 1967, pp. 71-8.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. David Arnold, *Famine: Social Crisis and Historical Change*, Oxford, 1988; Amartya Sen, *Poverty and Famines: an Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation*, Oxford, 1981.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Peter Solar, 'The Great Famine was No Ordinary Subsistence Crisis', in E. Margaret Crawford, ed., *Famine: The Irish Experience 900-1900*, Edinburgh, 1989, pp. 127-8.[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Quoted in Austin Bourke, 'The visitation of God'? the potato and the Great Irish Famine, Dublin, 1993, p. 173.[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. *Ibid.*[Back to \(7\)](#)

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