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THE GREAT FAMINE AND OTHER FAMINES

Cormac Ó Gráda

An unbroken link?

Much has been made over the last few years of the link between Irish folk memory of the Great Famine and Irish generosity towards the Third World. Sometimes the link has a prescriptive aspect, as when President Robinson tells us that “we can honour the profound dignity of human survival best ... by taking our folk memory of this catastrophe [the Great Famine] into the present world with us, and allowing it to strengthen and deepen our identity with those who are still suffering”. That aspect is one stressed by the various charity agencies. But the link is also given a historical gloss. Again, President Robinson: “the past gave Ireland a moral viewpoint and an historically informed compassion on some of the events happening now”.

In truth, the ties are less strong than some of us might like to think. Since I am not going to prove this rigorously, I hope I can get away with a few cameos. I was struck by the reaction of Raymond McClean, a volunteer doctor from Derry and for a time mayor of that city, when first accosted by the horrors of famine in Harbu in the province of Wollo, Ethiopia, in 1984.

“Suddenly”, he remarked, “the thought struck me, right between the eyes - my God, I am walking through the Irish famine”. In Dr. McClean’s case the Irish Famine, then, far from being the motivating force for his time in Africa, was an afterthought. Again, I think the remarks of Bob Geldof are relevant here. In *Is That It?* Geldof says that his “point of light was an image from Michael Buerk’s news report [on the BBC]. Buerk had used the word biblical. A famine of biblical proportions. To expiate yourself truly of any complicity in this evil meant you had to give something of

yourself. I was stood against the wall". Nothing about the Irish Famine in Geldof's reaction to it either.

Again, thinking of the impact of the Famine on recent Irish literature in English, it is the sequence of poems by Séamus Heaney in *Death of a Naturalist* and Thomas Murphy's *Famine* which most readily spring to mind, but it turns out that the inspiration for both was not folk memory but Cecil Woodham-Smith's *The Great Hunger*, published in 1962. And I think most of what the many Irish people today know about the Famine stems not from what they heard by the fireside but from the likes of Woodham-Smith and Robert Kee. How could it be otherwise in a country where the bulk of the population is now urban and lives in areas least affected by the Famine?

I have argued elsewhere that a much more important influence on Third World giving is the Irish tradition of missionary activity far afield, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa. With the growing self-confidence of the Irish Catholic Church after the Famine whole generations of Irish people became missionaries, literally or vicariously. The link is direct in the case of Concern, a re-incarnation of Africa Concern, established by Holy Ghost Missionaries in west Africa in the 1970s, while Trócaire, another major charity agency, was created by the Irish Catholic hierarchy.

Yet here too, the story is not quite that simple. Until relatively recently, the emphasis in Irish missionary endeavour was more on souls than on bodies. In the widely-sold *Far East*, for example, in the mid-1940s there was very little about economic development or the relief of poverty, and money was sought to support personnel and church buildings. Nor, despite articles about Christ's poor in Nancheng City or how tribesmen in Upper Burma subsisted on a diet of rice, was there a single mention of the Great Irish Famine between 1945 and 1947. When precisely Irish missionaries began to take up Third World causes is an interesting topic: but it was probably in the 1960s with the changes augured in by Pope John XXIII.

Third World charities, then, have re-discovered the Famine. Perhaps the credit for being first should go to Gorta, which proclaimed in the first issue of its *Gorta News* in 1970 "Gorta is the Irish word for famine, which word itself will always stir emotive responses in Irish hearts". However, this was to be the only mention of the Irish famine in *Gorta News*, which ceased publication in 1973.

History never quite repeats itself, and the contexts of Ireland's famine and modern, mainly African, famines are quite different. Superficially, of course, all famines are alike. But the differences are worth reflecting on. Before turning to comparison, two important points. First, I readily admit that I know more about Ireland than about modern famine-stricken regions. Second, because comparison is often part of the rhetoric of condescension, it should be stressed that all famines, whatever their cause and their scope, are horrible and a scandal.



Excess mortality

In New York in May 1995 I heard the great Indian, Harvard-based economist Amartya Sen - on whom more later - declare that the Great Irish Famine may well have been the gravest ever in a relative sense. This is surely somewhat of an exaggeration. But it turns out that, by comparison, the numbers perishing in many highly-publicised Third World famines in the recent past are modest. There is no ready-made list, but I have gathered together some numbers from here and there.

For example, the official death toll in Bangladesh in 1974 was twenty-six thousand; the Sahel famine of 1973-74 killed perhaps one hundred thousand people; the famine in Darfur, western Sudan in the mid-1980s killed somewhat fewer than one hundred thousand. All three occurred in areas with a far bigger population than Ireland in 1845. One guess at excess mortality in the famine-affected areas of Ethiopia in 1973 puts it at 40,000; another puts excess deaths in Ethiopia as a whole in 1972-74 at about 200,000. In Malawi (then Nyasaland), official sources estimated that the famine of 1949-50 was responsible for the deaths of 100-200 people.

Moreover, few famines on record in western Europe matched the Great Famine in intensity: one such may have been that of *bliain an áir*, 1740-41, again in Ireland, but the evidence for this is sketchy. But neither the *années de misère* towards the end of Louis XIV's reign or the famines affecting England before the reign of Elizabeth the First were in the same league.

Now, two recent African famines are exceptional in this respect. The death tolls from war and famine in Biafra in 1968-70 probably reached a million people. Reliable estimates of famine deaths in Ethiopia in 1982-85 are lacking. In 1987 Gopalakrishna Kumar argued for a toll of at least one million, but the information reported by John Seaman suggests a smaller number. One has to reach further back for other disasters on the Irish scale. The Soviet famine of 1921-22, Stalin's Ukraine famine of the 1930s, the Great Bengali Famine of the 1940s killed many more people than the Great Irish

Famine, while the Chinese Great Leap Forward famine of 1959-62 is in a macabre league of its own.

The high mortality that followed from the Great Famine raises another related comparative issue. In his *Why Ireland Starved* (1983), Joel Mokyr proposed a redefinition of poverty in terms of the likelihood of “a random individual at a random point in time dropping below subsistence”. A plausible implication of this definition, which stresses that poverty is not just about averages but fluctuations around averages, is the expectation that famines become gradually less lethal as the proportion of the population at risk declines. It follows that, considered historically, the last peacetime famines to affect a particular region should be whimpers rather than bangs.

The historian John Iliffe’s claim that, between 1927 and the end of the colonial era, Africa (Ethiopia apart) saw very few “famines that kill” fits this scenario. Iliffe points to “effective government, good transport, wider markets and some increase in average wealth” as the main reasons for this. The trouble is that in many parts of Africa, alas, war and political instability brought a return of famine after Independence. We have good information on the years of “crisis” mortality in England between the 1540s and the 1860s, and this suggests that both the size and duration of famines also declined gradually over time.

Ireland’s pre-Famine famines fit such a neo-malthusian pattern. Mortality from famine had been considerable in 1800-01 and 1817-19 (perhaps 40,000-60,000 in each case). The famines of 1822 and 1831 also produced excess mortality, but on a far smaller scale. Had the potato failed only in 1845 we would be saying the same of 1845. But that was not to be, and the Great Famine brought the age of famines in Ireland to a dramatic, apocalyptic, end. This underlines the ecological shock aspect of the Great Famine.

The Great Famine was also the true “last great subsistence crisis of the western world” - unless one includes the Great Finnish Famine of 1868. What of the eastern world? In recent decades

famines seem to have been eradicated in China and India. It would be nice to think that just as the Irish Famine marked the virtual end of famine in western Europe, the modern famines listed above reflect the last whimpers of what John Iliffe has dubbed "conjunctural poverty" in Africa.

Mortality by age and gender

As noted earlier, estimating excess mortality during the Irish Famine is a tricky business. Estimating the relative impact of the crisis on men and women and on different age groups is more difficult still. Any such exercise for the country as a whole hinges on necessarily debatable assumptions about normal mortality rates, deficiencies in the 1841 census, and emigration before and during the Famine period. For what they are worth, the gender ratios implied in the 1851 census are given in Table 1. Since deaths in rural areas accounted for the bulk of the total, the outcome is consistent with a slight male edge in mortality during the Famine years. The relative advantage of women must be seen against their relative deprivation, marked in nineteenth-century Ireland in normal times.

**TABLE 1: GENDER RATIO OF REPORTED DEATHS
IN 1851 CENSUS**

Year	Rural areas Male/Female	'Civic' areas Male/Female	Public Institutions Male/Female
1843	1.16	1.15	1.14
1844	1.15	1.14	1.10
1845	1.13	1.10	1.05
1846	1.17	1.07	1.09
1847	1.25	1.13	1.11
1848	1.20	1.11	1.14
1849	1.22	1.07	1.09

What of microdata? Catholic parish registers are of little use here, because even the best of them lack detailed burial data. Protestant registers can add some insight, however. Some were destroyed in the Four Courts fire of 1922, but those that survive contain the names and ages of most of the people buried. As part of a larger study of the Famine in Dublin, I have looked at the evidence on burials in several Dublin city registers. In the 1840s about one-quarter of the people of Dublin were Protestants, and the city still contained a large Protestant working-class population, as likely to be affected by the crisis as their Catholic neighbours. An analysis of the registers of three southside parishes suggests: (a) that Dublin indeed experienced some excess mortality during the Famine years, and (b) that male mortality exceeded female.

Table 2 summarises the data in the burial registers for two neighbouring parishes in the south of Ireland, those of Ballymodan and Kilbrogan in County Cork. These were then largely urban parishes; almost two-thirds of their people lived in the (economically depressed) town of Bandon. About one in four of the combined population of the two parishes was Protestant at the time. Bandon was very badly hit by the Famine. A Yorkshire newspaper proprietor noted soon afterwards:

Bandon is a clean town, and has a rather prosperous appearance. But it suffered severely during the Famine, and one street was pointed out to us in which not a single inhabitant was left. Those who escaped death fled to distant lands, and when we saw it, every house was desolate; the garden fences were broken down; the doors and windows were partially in a state of visible decay; and the rank grass was growing about the thresholds. Altogether, it was one of the most saddening sights we ever looked upon.

Two broad impressions follow from Bandon's Protestant registers. First, the burials evidence confirms that the Famine did not kill Catholics only; among Bandon's Protestants mortality was almost 60 per cent above its immediate pre-Famine level during

1846-48. Second, the crisis seems to have increased male mortality more than female, but there were no striking changes in the incidence by age.

**TABLE 2: BURIALS IN BALLYMODAN AND KILBROGAN
BY AGE AND GENDER, 1843-51** (Percentages in parentheses)

Age	Males			Females		
	1843-5	1846-8	1849-51	1843-5	1846-8	1849-51
0-9	34 (36)	51 (30)	24 (25)	27 (28)	40 (29)	21 (23)
10-19	18 (19)	29 (17)	19 (20)	13 (13)	21 (15)	15 (16)
30-49	8 (9)	19 (11)	11 (11)	17 (17)	13 (10)	12 (13)
50-69	13 (14)	29 (17)	24 (25)	20 (20)	27 (20)	19 (21)
70 +	12 (13)	43 (25)	18 (19)	21 (21)	35 (26)	25 (27)
Total	94	171	96	99	141	92

What of modern famines? Several studies find that male mortality rates rise more during famines. One reason for this may be the reduction in female fertility - a universal phenomenon - and an associated fall in maternal mortality. Another reason mentioned is that healthy females store more body fat than males, and therefore can withstand deprivation longer. A Trinity colleague suggests that it may have had something to do with female control of the purse-strings, but I have my doubts about that one.

The evidence on mortality by age is less clearcut. Some studies report a relative pro-child bias in intra-familial allocations during crises. In south Asia in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, contrary to what might be expected, the biggest increases in mortality occurred in age-groups where normal mortality was light, i.e. among older children and adults. In a recent study of excess mortality in Darfur, western Sudan in the mid-1980s, Alex de Waal found that child deaths rose more than infant or adult deaths. Overall, there are no universal patterns in the age-distribution of famine deaths.

Medicine and nosology

Relatively few died of literal starvation during the Great Famine; dysentery, typhus, typhoid fever, and other hunger-induced infectious diseases did most of the damage. Many of those contracting fever recovered from it, but it is important to remember that when the disease struck there was little that medical knowledge *per se* could contribute. Isolation in fever hospitals was the main institutional remedy for fever. In an era when cupping and leeching, mercury, opium, and a variety of powders or concoctions were the order of the day, medical ‘remedies’ are likely to have done more harm than good. Of course, the fact that the relevant aspects of scientific medicine were still far in the future did not prevent doctors from having a very high opinion of themselves in the 1840s. The importance of cleanliness in the homes and yards of the poor was understood, and the link between contaminated food, water and dysentery stressed but it was not so easy to do much about it.

Doctors hadn’t a clue. Many believed that “the epidemic, like the ague, owes its origin to terrestrial miasms”. And there were controversies between medics. In an attack on other Dublin medical men who held that famine conditions caused fever, the editor of the *Dublin Medical Press* thought “it could easily be shown that famine and destitution are more frequently the effect than the cause of fever”. Medical historians have lauded the commitment and heroism of medical personnel, but results are another matter.

How much difference would better medical knowledge have made? Would the famished simply not have died of something else? These are difficult questions, awaiting considered answers. But the evidence of Third World famines may tell us something. Since the 1840s medical technology has made massive strides both in diagnosis and treatment.

First, antibiotics and anti-bacterials that can relieve typhus, typhoid fever, dysentery, and also anti-malarials have been available since the 1940s. Second, disinfectants and insecticides which help control or eradicate flies, fleas, lice and ticks that cause these fevers,

have been in widespread use since the 1940s. Third, mass vaccination campaigns reduce the incidence of meningitis and measles, which are more likely to be lethal in famine conditions. Finally, though therapeutic drugs are of little help against dysentery, a major killer, ways of providing clean water are well understood.

Morbidity and mortality surveys have highlighted the vital role of rehydration together with good nutrition in the recovery from dysentery. However, it has to be said that in recent famines increased resistance to commonly used drugs against bacillary dysentery has been reported. And although vitamin supplements are more easily distributed than food, the right kind of food is the main defence against xerophthalmia, scurvy, and pellagra, common occurrences in Ireland in the 1840s.

The evidence of modern famines suggests that medical technology alone is not enough to eliminate mass mortality. Almost invariably, there are time lags between detection and action, and red tape brings its own delays and conflicts. Famine-induced anaemia makes it difficult for people to absorb oral medicines. Ignorance on the part of those at risk is also a problem. Thus one suspects that in Ireland in the 1840s, as in modern Africa, modern medicine alone would have been a poor substitute for plenty of healthy food, clean clothes, proper housing, and sanitation. But given food, medicine can achieve much.

Another aspect of the medical issue is that medicine has probably shifted the class-structure of famine mortality somewhat since the nineteenth century. In Ireland, the poor were the main targets of disease such as mild typhoid fever in normal times, but during the Great Famine "when fever attacked the higher classes it was universally of a much more fatal character than amongst the poor". Its better-off victims included the Rosminian preacher Luigi Gentili, who died in Dublin in 1848 of a fever caught while hearing confessions.

At greatest risk were those who came into contact with the diseased in the course of their work. Among doctors an eminent example is the anatomist Valentine Flood, who had been working

for the Board of Health in Tipperary, and who was “among the many voluntary victims offered by the profession to the Moloch of typhus contagion”. With the clergy it was a similar story. It is occasionally claimed that “no priest died during the Famine”, but that is ignorant cant. In fact, many priests died of fever during the Famine, as did many clergymen of other denominations.

By implication, then, another important difference between the Irish famine and today’s famines is that modern elites are largely immune from the externalities once caused by famine. Modern Irish aid workers are similar enough to the priests and the medical personnel of the Famine era to carry the point. Of the hundreds of volunteers who have worked in Africa since the 1980s, one was murdered in Somalia and several were attacked by famine fevers, but it seems that none so far has died of famine-related illnesses.

The difference may have a broader implication. The American evangelist Asenath Nicholson, one of the most perceptive and humane outside observers of the Irish Famine, wrote of the “comfortable classes” of Dublin, that “whatever the hospitality they might manifest towards guests and visitors, [they] had never troubled themselves by looking into the real wants of the suffering poor”. Nonetheless, the danger of contracting famine fever through contact with the poor or through inhaling infected air was a major preoccupation of those ‘comfortable classes’ during the Great Famine. Long before the Famine, those seeking to help the poor had found that appealing to the self-interest of the better-off in towns and cities was a good way of producing results. During the Famine it prompted the creation of fever hospitals, the financing of the Board of Health, and the control of begging in Dublin and in Belfast. One suspects that such enlightened self-interest on the part of elites counts for less in parts of the Third World today.

War and peace

The poem that begins with the line “*Ní cogadh ná caragail fhada idir ard righthibh* (it is not war nor enduring strife between

high kings)" by the Jacobite Séamus MacCoitir is about another great Irish famine, that of 1740-41. Earlier famines had been the product of invasion and civil strife, but Ireland was tranquil in 1740. MacCoitir's first lines have a modern ring. "In much of Africa", writes Alex de Waal, "war has become synonymous with famine". War increases the vulnerability to famine in obvious ways such as by destroying crops, deflecting economic activity, frustrating relief, and dampening democracy and protest.

However, as in the 1740s, Ireland faced no civil war or major unrest in the 1840s. Indeed some contemporary observers spoke of a delusive calm in Ireland on the eve of the Famine. Faction fighting and rural strife, so common in the 1820s and 1830s, had been quelled by an alliance of police and priests. Ordinary crime was also in decline. The inoffensive 'rising' of 1848 lasted only a matter of hours and in any case took place when the worst of the Famine was over. Therefore disrupted communications and military distractions were not a factor in Ireland during the Famine.

This was all quite unlike the situation in so many African countries in recent decades. The horrors of Biafra, Ethiopia, or Somalia immediately spring to mind. Discussing Mozambique in the 1980s, Alex de Waal writes that some "analysis" of famine there amounts to "little more than a catalogue of Renamo vandalism". The risk of famine in Angola today is increased by the land mines (an estimated 10-15 million) left behind by the warring parties. In war-torn parts of the Sudan mines are more likely to kill cattle than people, but with potentially grave consequences too for pastoral farmers. Civil conflict also produces its IDPs (internally displaced people) and refugees. Modern famines have less to do with Malthus than with Mars.

Rich neighbours, poor neighbours

Another difference is that today's famine-stricken areas are located in the most economically backward regions of the world, where neighbouring regions seem to be nearly as poor as the region

directly affected. We need only consider famine-afflicted Ethiopia or southern Sudan. But one of the striking things about the Irish Famine of the 1840s is its geographical setting: it occurred in the back-yard of a relatively prosperous region. However, economic history suggests the need for perspective here. We should not overlook the harsh conditions faced by the British poor at the time, and the poverty of even smug, mid-Victorian Britain by our own late-twentieth century standards.



The Irish Famine occurred in the back-yard of a relatively prosperous region.

How poor was Ireland in the early 1840s compared with, say, Ethiopia or Somalia today? Only the crudest answer is possible. I reckon that Irish living standards on the eve of the Famine lay somewhere between those of Ethiopia and of Somalia a few years ago, though closer to Somalia's. The comparison also suggests that the rich world today has a much greater margin to spare than Britain

did in the 1840s. According to the kind of political arithmetic just described, living standards in Britain in the 1840s paralleled those of Indonesia or Egypt today. Without seeking to absolve those in power in Westminster of responsibility for not having tried harder, does this not make the persistence of famines in the Third World in the 1980s or 1990s a greater scandal than its presence in Ireland in the 1840s?

Ideology and bureaucracy

Nor is the philosophical context the same today as in the 1840s. This is an important point, but one well rehearsed elsewhere. Peter Gray has argued - and I agree with him - that "the charge of culpable neglect of the consequences of policies leading to mass starvation is indisputable. That a conscious choice to pursue moral or economic objectives at the expense of human life was made by several ministers is also demonstrable". So there is some truth in John Mitchel's claim that "Ireland died of political economy". Now, this is not to argue that a native government would have done a better job. Its heart might have been in a better place, but it would not have had the wherewithal. Daniel O'Connell's plea to fellow MPs in Westminster is apposite here: "Ireland was in their hands", he said, "if they did not save her, she could not save herself".

In India later similar attitudes would also constrain relief. There, historians insist, the machinery necessary to eradicate famine was available long before it was put into use. Why? Because those in power believed that "India would have been pauperised, its work ethos shattered, and an importunate populace of government dependents would have been created". To relieve one famine would only "have postponed a calamitous reckoning when a swollen population multiplied beyond its subsistence".

No government or international agency would argue that offering unstinting relief to famine somewhere now would only make things worse down the road. Or that famines are a divine plan to teach people a lesson. Such heartless claptrap is not much heard

today. Ideology may still exacerbate crises or the risk of crises. I have given a few examples elsewhere. But history also suggests that 'good' government can help avert famines. Prompt and enlightened action in Kenya, in Botswana, and in Bangladesh in the 1970s and 1980s provide good case-studies, but the ambitious public works programme set up in the Indian province of Maharashtra (population 50 million) in the early 1970s is the best-known case in point. Indians are proud of the success of policy there, and rightly so, because the threat to a large area in a poor country was very real. In Maharashtra the output of foodgrain and pulses was 19 per cent less than normal in 1970-71, 27 per cent less in 1971-72, and 53 per cent less in 1972-73. Nevertheless, there is no evidence for a significant rise in mortality, and the birth rate fell off only slightly in these years. Now, in Maharashtra, though poor, the institutional infrastructure was there to begin with; "fair price shops" which distributed rations of grain at slightly subsidised prices were already widely established, and the public works through which most relief was administered were set up very early on. Moreover, anybody who wanted work on the works got it.

The civil servants with responsibility for Ireland in the 1840s were certainly less corrupt and more sophisticated than most Third World bureaucracies today. So were those handling the poor law on the ground, inspectors, clerks, and guardians. The same goes for the police, unloved perhaps, but pretty straight. I cannot remember a case of one of them being arrested for fraud. Ireland then is not Somalia or Zaire now. Moreover, Ireland's vibrant and relatively free press offered an adequate 'early warning system' of looming disaster and detailed information on where needs were greatest, and communications were quite good.

But was it that simple? There is the issue of the efficient transmission of aid from the centre to those at risk, or what is called 'agency'. Agency has become one of the disputatious issues in Famine studies. The claim here is a double one. First, supporters of the agency view argue that the areas with most 'voice' or influence

tended to be those less affected by famine. And so, Connacht had fewest priests to plead the poor's case, Skibbereen had no relief organisations, and the Society of Friends helped Munster more than Connacht. Second, the argument goes, corruption and favouritism at local level may have meant that the allocation of funds, not their provision, was the fundamental problem. And of course, it is easy to pinpoint cases of landlords supporting their own pet projects and their own tenants and of labourers cheating on the works.

Against the objection that the clergy were there to speak up for the most needy, the 'agency' interpretation sees the priests supporting the landlord sympathetic to the Church over the landlord who refused a site for a new church. Or it mentions that some priests seemed more preoccupied by church-building than relief. Against the objection that labouring on the public works in the winter and spring of 1847 was *no picnic*, it objects that there were riots when the works ceased. Again Mary Daly, a cogent and persuasive proponent of the 'agency' view, writes of "undeserving large farmers" being employed at the expense of neighbours on the works and of resentment against farmers being paid for horses supplied. Such 'agency' theorising implies that ideology was no real constraint, because throwing more money at the problem would simply have lined the pockets of the wrong people - gombeen men, farmers, landlords, and so on. I still believe that in Ireland the problem was less institutional than ideological. The way was there in the 1840s, but not the will. Today, very often, where there is a will there is no way.

To argue that spending more would have made no difference in Ireland in the 1840s is to argue that what was spent saved no lives either - or else that Whitehall had managed to 'fine-tune' relief to a degree that seems quite implausible. Given its (so far) very slender evidential base, the new emphasis on agency smacks just a little of apologetics. Yet this is a controversy about which we will hear much more and which only detailed research will resolve. This is a reminder of how much work needs to be done.

Food shortages and entitlements

It is often said of modern famines that they are less the product of food shortages or poor harvests *per se* than a lack of purchasing power. In particular, economist Amartya Sen has pointed to famines in his native Bengal and in Ethiopia as products of a drop in what he calls the “entitlements” of the landless. In Ethiopia in 1973, he says, “famine took place with no abnormal reduction in food output, and consumption of food per head at the height of the famine was fairly normal for Ethiopia as a whole”. Not everybody agrees, of course, but Sen’s approach has the cardinal advantage of stressing the role of maldistribution or inequality, which is a key feature of every famine.

How does the cap fit Ireland? One of the most evocative images of the Irish Famine is of a people being left to starve while their corn was being shipped off under police and military protection to pay rents. Economists Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen write of “English consumers attract[ing] food away, through the market mechanism,



from famine-stricken Ireland to rich England, with ship after ship sailing down the river Shannon with various types of food". Not all the food left. Even in Skibbereen in December 1846 "notwithstanding all this distress, there was a market plentifully supplied with meat, bread, fish, in short everything". What Woodham-Smith called this "extraordinary contradiction" - images of poverty in the midst of plenty - has inspired modern artists from playwright Thomas Murphy to Sinéad O'Connor.

However, this enduring, populist image of the Famine as starvation when there was enough food to feed everybody oversimplifies. It is somewhat ahistorical in that it ignores the inequalities at the root of Irish society in normal times: before the Famine, few of those who died around Skibbereen would have been able to afford the meat, bread and fish referred to above. And dwelling on the exported grain masks the reality that at the height of the Famine grain exports were dwarfed by imports of cheaper grain, mainly maize.

TABLE 3: THE IRISH GRAIN TRADE, 1843-1848
(IN 1,000 TONS)

Year	Exports	Imports	(Maize)
1843	480	15	(1)
1844	424	30	(1)
1845	513	28	(7)
1846	284	197	(122)
1847	146	889	(632)
1848	314	439	(306)

In the history of the Great Irish Famine the issue of grain exports has more symbolic than real importance. In order to see this, let us suppose that the transfer of all the exported grain from farmers to the starving masses had been costless both in terms of resources spent on collection and future output foregone. Alas, the ensuing increased supply of food would have made only a small dent in the gap left by the blight. On the eve of the Famine the potato harvest yielded about

12-15 million tons annually, half of which went to human consumption. Thus the 430,000 tons of grain exported in 1846 and 1847 must be set against a shortfall of about 20 million tons of potatoes in those same years. Allowing the exported grain four times the calorific value of potatoes, and ignoring animal feed requirements, the exported grain would still have filled only about one-seventh of the gap left by the potatoes in Ireland in these two crucial years.



Thus, though official neglect and endemic injustice played their part in Ireland in 1846 and 1847, there is no denying that the Irish Famine was, at least in those years, also a classic case of food shortage. Only by adopting an all-UK perspective to the problem in those years might an interpretation stressing entitlements instead of food availability be defended: but that would run against two strong historiographical traditions.

A further difficulty is the long drawn-out character of the Irish Famine. The transfer implicit in the entitlements approach, instead of being a once-off surprise, would have become a kind of repeated game. The consequences for the farmers' output reaction could not have been good.

In support of the entitlements approach, deaths from starvation continued during 1848-49. Those deaths, confined largely to the west of Ireland and occurring well after Whitehall had washed its hands of the Famine, might well fit an entitlements approach better. The issue requires further analysis.

Mass emigration

All famines induce people to move in search of food and in order to escape disease; there is much movement from rural areas into the towns. But a distinction must be made between such local movements, mainly by adult males from more to less afflicted areas, and permanent long-distance migration. Mass long-distance emigration is another legacy of the Irish Famine that distinguishes it from modern famines. For many of the Irish poor in the 1840s, unlike the Somali or Sudanese poor today, mass emigration provided a welcome safety-valve.

Though data on the socio-economic backgrounds of those who died and those who emigrated are lacking, it seems fair to assume that the latter were mostly people of some modest means. For most of the landless poor, with no savings or compensation for eviction to fall back on, the cost of a passage would have been too high. The story of Anne Nowlan, a Roscommon woman who had sought refuge for herself and six children in a night asylum in Dublin's Bow Street, is interesting in this respect. Nowlan had been put into custody by the keeper for failing to account for a large sum of money in her possession. The magistrate evinced surprise at the family's condition, "while she had so much money about her". The following is Anne Nowlan's account (*Freeman's Journal*, 8 May 1847):

She lived in the county Roscommon, and her husband held about ten acres of land, but he died last Shrovetide; she had no means of sowing a crop, and she gave up the place to a collector of poor rate, who gave her £15 for it; she got £5 for a mare, and £4 for a cow, 10s. for a cart and harrow, and more money for other things, and this made up all she had; she was about going to America, but she would not be taken with her children for less than £27.



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When her eldest boy, a thirteen-year old, corroborated her story, the magistrate deemed it “evidently true”, and discharged her.

Much has been written about the terrible conditions endured by these ‘economic refugees’ and the high mortality on ‘coffin ships’. But it was not quite so simple. The American economic historian Raymond Cohn has inferred migrant mortality on the passage between Europe and New York between 1836 and 1853 from a sample of contemporary passenger lists. What is most remarkable about his findings is that neither the Irish as a group nor the famine years stand out; the record of German ships in 1847 and 1848 was much worse, and curiously 1849, not 1847, produced the highest mortality overall. In Table 4 Irish ports and Liverpool represent Irish emigrants. True, the death rate out of Liverpool was higher in 1847-48 than in 1845-46, but the mean mortality rate was still less than 2 per cent.

**TABLE 4: MORTALITY ON NEW YORK-BOUND SHIPS
1845-1853**

Year	(a) Irish Ports		(b) L'rpool		(c) France		(d) Germany		(e) London	
	MR	Obs.	MR	Obs.	MR	Obs.	MR	Obs.	MR	Obs.
1845	-	-	0.76	13	0.61	8	0.96	5	3.57	1
1846	-	-	0.91	18	1.18	11	1.07	13	1.28	5
1847	1.33	5	1.73	17	0.83	6	3.77	5	1.09	3
1848	2.74	5	1.36	34	1.35	11	3.36	2	1.04	2
1849	3.36	14	3.33	47	1.74	7	1.51	8	0.56	1
1850	1.16	7	1.54	50	0.55	3	4.41	3	1.89	2
1851	0.67	16	1.28	78	0.79	12	1.05	8	0.52	8
1852	3.59	2	0.88	67	0.74	16	0.55	5	0.96	12
1853	0.62	5	1.73	54	1.30	18	1.01	27	1.23	10

Other data, it is true, highlight 1847, and mortality among passengers who chose ships bound for Maritime and Canadian destinations (nearly half of the Irish who crossed the Atlantic in Black '47, but only 10-15 per cent thereafter) was higher than those bound for New York. Cohn's numbers exclude ships that sank or turned back and unrecorded deaths on board. Still, his results suggest that Mokyr's assessment that the overall death rate on the north Atlantic passage - "five per cent of the total overseas migration at the most" - errs on the high side.

In the circumstances, the outcome is an impressive achievement. Crucially, most of Ireland's 'boat people' eventually reached their destinations in America or Britain. None of this is to deny that conditions on the passage were harsh, or that there was exploitation of emigrants. But the fundamental comparative point to make here is that surely many of today's famine-stricken poor would give up everything in return for manual jobs and poor housing in North America, Japan, or western Europe. Reflecting on the alternative offered by Third World experience tells us that the Irish were 'lucky' to emigrate and to be allowed in, and that many more would have died in Ireland had this safety-valve not existed.

Traders and famines

As Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen remind us in their recent book, this is a topic “that is not always approached dispassionately”. Part of the problem is that the empirical evidence for and against the traders is mixed. Traders make their money by moving goods from low to high price areas and by speculating correctly on price movements over time. Markets have a poor reputation in the context of Third World hunger, and I thought therefore that some musings about them in the context of the Famine would be of interest.

If markets help to even out scarcities, regional or temporal, that would seem a ‘good thing’. Modern evidence also points to the disastrous consequences of governments paralysing private trade. Drèze and Sen compare policies pursued in Botswana and neighbouring Kenya during the droughts of the 1980s. In Botswana, where trade was free, a competitive food market kept price differentials across regions to a minimum. In Kenya grain movements were strictly controlled; as a result huge price differentials between regions emerged, reaching a ratio of ten to one between highest and lowest for a short time. This suggests the need for the free movement of goods. However, when there are few traders government intervention may be needed.

In Ireland in the 1840s, as in India later, officialdom had learned its Adam Smith and Edmund Burke well; allowing private traders full freedom was a major preoccupation. But what of the situation on the ground? This is a topic where accounts rarely go beyond anecdote or assertion. It is easy to find contemporary criticisms of rapacious traders. The huge rise in grain prices in late 1846 prompted one of Trevelyan’s informants to tell him in late December 1846 that “£40,000 to £80,000 were spoken of as being made by merchants” in Cork, and to hope that government would intervene to check “the extortionate prices”. Bessborough, the Lord Lieutenant, informed Prime Minister Russell a few weeks later that “there is no great doubt that the merchants in the great towns have taken advantage... and in some places are keeping up the prices by the most unfair means”.

Such exploitation is the stuff of fiction and oral history too. Neither William Carleton's *The Black Prophet* nor Liam O'Flaherty's *The House of Gold* is directly about the Famine, but Carleton's was prompted by the Famine and both are full of famine resonances. For Carleton (referring to the Clogher Valley in the early nineteenth century) and O'Flaherty (referring to south Connemara in the late nineteenth century) the case against the exploiting mealmonger or gombeen man was an open and shut one. Yet (and maybe for that reason) hard evidence on how they behaved in crisis times is lacking. The notion that either collusion on the part of greedy merchants or extortion by remote monopoly traders exacerbated an already serious crisis is often echoed elsewhere. For example, many accounts of the greed of Malawi's maize traders in 1949 survive.

Did the traders and the moneylenders make the killings such accounts imply? Here all I can offer are some preliminary, tentative clues. Before doing so, three simple points based on the kind of elementary price theory we teach first years in UCD are worth bearing in mind. First, supply shocks would have caused monopolies to increase their prices less than firms in a competitive industry. Second, higher prices induced by supply shocks would have reduced the profits of monopolists. Third, the drastic fall in the purchasing power of their customers would have induced mealmongers - other things remaining the same - to reduce, not increase, their prices. These theoretical points suggest that some contemporary observers may have mistaken adverse supply shocks for monopoly power. On the other hand, some of the criticism may have referred to trades (such as that in Indian corn) that were unfamiliar, and therefore more amenable for exploitation.

There are several ways to interpret the claim that markets worked poorly during the Famine. The failure could have been temporary (e.g. early on, as in late 1846, when the trade in Indian meal was new); it could have been partial (for example, restricted to remote areas); or it could have been intertemporal (perhaps

agents hoarded, or held on to their stocks for too long). The business accounts of Famine traders that might shed light on these possibilities have not survived, but food price data from the period are plentiful. My tentative verdict, based on recent research into this subject, is that markets worked fairly well. The analysis is quite technical so the best I can do here is to try and give an intuition.

In a well-integrated market, persistent price differences between regions stem largely from transport costs. Therefore if markets continue to work well during a harvest failure, a reduction in the price variation across regions such as counties or provinces should follow, since the fixed transactions cost element should decline as a fraction of the whole. However, if markets become more segmented, a bigger gap between regions or counties might be expected. An analysis of potato prices in hundreds of Irish towns between 1840 and 1846 suggests that the market for potatoes worked tolerably well till then. These numbers are not ideal for our purpose; they extend only as far as the harvest of 1845, the first to be affected by blight. Data on grain prices also survive, and are probably of higher quality in that a grain crop such as wheat or oats was more homogeneous than the potatoes underlying the information above. To summarise simply, my strategy here was to look for persistent gaps between grain and oatmeal prices in the main Irish cities and between such cities and London.

On the whole the trends do not incriminate Irish grain merchants. There is one tentative exception. The outcome seems to point a finger of suspicion at Cork grain merchants, since the ratio of the mean Cork to Liverpool price in late 1846 and early 1847 was considerably (10-15 per cent) higher than in the following months. But whether the outcome reflects a conspiracy on the part of Cork's grain merchants or merely delays in maize reaching Cork remains unresolved.

What of remoter rural areas? That is a question for future research; *a priori* reasoning is not enough. In late 1846, when the Famine was really beginning to bite, one senior poor law official alerted Trevelyan about how hard it was to procure retail supplies in 'remote' districts,

and about the lack of small retail outlets for corn. The result was that the poor were forced to "travel considerable distances from their homes to purchase food". Given that most poor people moved about on foot, knowledge about prices was hardly perfect.

Hoarding and speculation are also part of the story. Modern evidence suggests that speculation can be destabilising in famine situations. Sen blames the situation in Bengal in 1943 largely on "speculative withdrawal and panic purchase of rice stocks encouraged by administrative chaos". Speculative withdrawals of foodgrains were also important in Bangladesh in 1974. As a crude test in my own *Ireland Before and After the Famine* I analysed seasonal movements in potato prices before and during the Famine. The test, inspired by work on late medieval corn prices, was to compare the seasonal rise in prices from autumn trough to summer peak before and during the Famine. If prices rose more from trough to peak than before, then traders were hoarding. The outcome of this admittedly limited test did not support the hypothesis that speculation made a bad situation worse.

Before leaving traders, a few comments on the provision of credit to the poor during the Famine. I will limit the discussion here to pawnbrokers. In Ireland pawnbrokers operated under relatively liberal laws, which allowed them to charge higher effective rates than their British counterparts. The result was a thriving Irish legal pawnbroking sector. Some sense of the extent of the business before and during the Famine is captured in Table 5.

TABLE 5: PAWNBROKING DURING THE FAMINE

Year	Tickets Issued	Sums Lent (nearest £)	Average (pence)
1843	10,517,022	1,458,839	33.3
1844	11,501,108	1,603,789	34.2
1845	13,039,882	1,849,758	34.0
1846	14,161,152	1,922,343	32.6
1847	11,081,865	1,293,332	28.0

Though pawnbrokers could be found throughout most of the island, there were still few in some of the most backward areas in the early 1840s. In Erris (which I think of as Ireland's Ultima Thule) 'the trade [was] unknown'. Nonetheless, pawnbrokers had made inroads into much of the west and south before the Famine, and their humble clients were from the strata most likely to be hurt by the Famine. The typical pledge was in clothing and for the equivalent of a few days' wages. Pawnbrokers' surviving records therefore allow some insight into how moneylenders fared during the crisis.

Did pawnbroking thrive during the Famine? The answer is a pretty emphatic no. In late 1848 pawnbrokers' premises in Tralee were "filled with wearing apparel of every description, homemade clothing materials, feather-beds, bedding, and tradesmen's tools of every kind". A "most respectable" pawnbroker in Fermoy related the increase in pledges in 1846 to "the destitution which commenced in that year", and the subsequent fall-off in business to the lack of suitable articles to pledge. And there is much more of that kind.

The aggregate number of legal pawn tickets fell by over one-fifth between 1846 and 1847, and the total lent by almost one-third. Neither those numbers nor individual accounts support the notion that the Famine was a golden opportunity for pawnbrokers. Surely the most plausible interpretation of them is that as creditworthiness dropped, business fell back in tandem.

Overall our findings are not robust enough to reject outright the hypothesis that the greed of millers, mealmongers, and the like exacerbated the Famine. It would be nice to think that it did, but the historian can only seek the truth. More work is needed.

A long drawn out affair

Another important feature of the Irish Famine, which of course makes it difficult to fit into any neat commemorative schedule, is that it was a very long-drawn out affair. If the second and near-total failure of the potato crop in 1846 marks the real beginning of the Great Famine, in Whitehall Russell's Whigs were already in effect declaring

it over in summer 1847. The lion's share of the responsibility for relieving those affected was then turned over to Ireland.

The crisis did not end in the summer of 1847. Famine conditions lasted for a long time after, particularly in western counties such as Clare and Mayo. In January 1849 a thoroughly disillusioned Edward Twistleton wrote to Trevelyan "others might say that we are slowly murdering the peasantry by the scantiness of relief". At the level of macroeconomic indicators such as banknote circulation or company profits, the recovery took a long time to occur. The number of inmates in Ireland's bleak workhouses, a more immediate proxy for deprivation, remained high long after 1847.

Mortality did not end in 1847 either. The Great Famine therefore had more in common with the seven lean years of the Old Testament than the better-known famines of the 1980s and 1990s. One likely result is that 'famine fatigue' was more of a problem in Ireland's case. The Society of Friends threw in the towel quite early on, believing that it was the government's responsibility to do more. It is also seen in the more modest efforts of local charities such as the Society of Sick and Indigent Roomkeepers, the Mendicity Institution, and the Dublin Parochial Association.

By contrast, the Finnish Famine of the 1860s, another major catastrophe, lasted just one awful year. The latest verdict on the better-known Soviet famine of 1932-33, based on newly-available data, suggests that it too lasted about a year. Even in the case of the Great Bengali Famine, which according to Sen yielded excess deaths for several years after 1943, a recent reassessment confines excess mortality to 1943-44. And the modern famines I have mentioned typically did not last anywhere nearly as long as the Irish Famine.

Concluding remarks

In sum, then, there are similarities between the Great Famine and modern famines, just as there are similarities between the Great Famine and famines throughout history. I have tried to show that the differences are at least as interesting as the similarities, and how we can learn from both. ■

NOTE

I am grateful to Mary Sutton for her helpful comments. I have tried here to retain the somewhat informal character of the original lecture. A shorter version of this paper, with full bibliography, is to appear in Helen O' Neill and John Toye (eds.), *A World Without Famine?* (forthcoming).

FURTHER READING

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