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THE ORGANISATION AND ADMINISTRATION OF RELIEF, 1845–52

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Chapter V

MEDICAL HISTORY OF THE FAMINE

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Introduction to the New Edition

The tradition of history-writing in Ireland is an ancient one. Much of the associated output, it is true, would not pass muster for objectivity or scholarship today, but modern controversies about 'revisionism' have their precedents in Keating's barbs at Stanyhurst or Madden's defence of the United Irishmen. A century or so ago, the works of Froude and Lecky vied for readers with the more populist accounts of Barry O'Brien or Michael Davitt. Half a century later, with the foundation of the Irish Historical Society and *Irish Historical Studies*, the scene had been set for a new, professionalized Irish history. The revolution inaugurated by a group of young Irish academics had just begun, though it had yet to bear fruit in published research. A lecture delivered in May 1943 by youthful Professor Theo Moody of the Department of Modern History, Trinity College, Dublin to fellow-members of the Irish Historical Society will illustrate the point. Moody's lecture on 'things to be done in [nineteenth-century] Irish history' is now available only in summary form, but reading that summary today highlights the poverty of scholarly research on that period of Irish history. Moody noted the lack of even a satisfactory general outline of modern Irish history, and referred those interested to the *Oxford History of England*. For a general bibliography, he recommended appendices to the *Cambridge Modern History*. The few specialist works on Irish history that Moody considered worth mentioning – George O'Brien's *Economic History of Ireland from the Union to the Famine* (1921), John O'Donovan's *Economic History of Live Stock in Ireland* (1940), Nicholas Mansergh's *Ireland in the Age of Reform and Revolution* (1940), and the works on land tenure by Elizabeth Hooker (1938) and N.D. Palmer (1940) – would be considered dated by most historians today.[1]

Against such competition, *The Great Famine: Studies in Irish History* wins by an Irish mile. Whatever about the evergreen charms of Mansergh, few refer to Hooker or O'Donovan nowadays, and hardly anybody believes O'Brien anymore; by contrast, most of the contributions to *The Great Famine* are still frequently consulted and cited in the literature. The book confronted an important if distressing subject with

unprecedented academic rigour, and overall its contents have worn very well indeed. It certainly deserves to be welcomed by a new generation of readers in this inexpensive format.

This classic work of Irish history is one with an interesting history of its own. Most of its authors have since become household names in Irish history-writing. For three of them, their researches on aspects of the Great Irish Famine marked the beginning of distinguished careers as historians. And for all seven authors and both editors, *The Great Famine* was to bulk large in their lives for many years before it reached the bookshops in early 1957. Indeed, there is a link between Theo Moody's lecture to the Irish Historical Society in 1943 and this book, because only a few months after his lecture Moody was appointed – or appointed himself – co-director of the project that would end up, much later, as *The Great Famine*.

This book has a history rich in its implications for the development of Irish historiography in the 1940s and 1950s – and since. The idea of an authoritative study of the Great Famine goes back to early in 1944, when An Taoiseach, Éamon de Valera, proposed that the centenary of the Famine be commemorated with a monograph by 'a trained historian whose name is already favourably known'. The government, unreasonably perhaps, wanted the task completed by 1945 or 1946. In return, it promised the prospective author a fee and a subsidy towards publication. The quest for an expert led to negotiations with the recently-formed Irish Committee of Historical Sciences. Perhaps because there was no obvious candidate, perhaps because the Committee wanted to control the project itself, the ICHS quickly converted the proposal into one of the earliest exercises of cooperative history-writing in Ireland (of which the massive *New History of Ireland* is the best-known example).[2] In some respects, the experiment did not bode well for the approach. Both Professor Robert Dudley Edwards of the Department of Modern Irish History, University College, Dublin and Professor Moody, the key figures at the outset, were formidable men in their very different ways. Neither would then be deemed an expert on the Great Famine – or indeed on the nineteenth century. Yet Moody was already supervising nineteenth-century Ph.D. theses by Hugh Shearman and Rodney Green, and was about to devote himself to the history of Queen's University, Belfast and to Michael Davitt. Both he and Edwards wrote on Thomas Davis and Young Ireland in 1945.

During 1944 Edwards and Moody attempted to capture the Famine project for their planned 'general scheme for the production of histori-

cal works', mainly because the government did not want to subsidize the ICHS's non-Irish publisher (Faber & Faber). As a second-best alternative, they undertook to find a local publisher, and to set a number of graduate students to work on a selected list of topics for inclusion in a separate book. It was left to Thomas P. O'Neill, then preparing for his master's degree in University College, Dublin, to propose appropriate topics. Dudley Edwards accordingly promised de Valera's secretary 'separate contributions dealing with the events, medical history, relief (including poor law amendment), emigration, population, agriculture, the people, political implications, the place of the famine in Irish history... a book of approximately 1000 pages... in print in 1946'.[3] Specialist chapters based on masters' dissertations would form the core of the book, but these would be supplemented by contributions from the editors and a few others. For its part the government committed £1500, a very substantial sum of money in those days when professors were paid £700–£800 a year. The agreement between Edwards, on behalf of the ICHS, and Maurice Moynihan, de Valera's secretary (and also Edwards' friend and neighbour!), led to the present volume of just half the promised size and over a dozen years late. The intervening years produced instances of procrastination, wrangles between the editors and civil servants about finance, the mislaying of copy and references, the revising of plans, changes of personnel, and abortive negotations with various publishers.

Moody soon resigned from the project. His replacement, Rev. Professor John Francis O'Doherty, was given 'full responsibilities for the final revision of the work' by the ICHS in January 1947. Father O'Doherty, by all accounts a kind and gentle man, had recently relinquished his chair in ecclesiastical history in Maynooth in difficult circumstances to become a curate in Omagh. He was a curious choice for editor, and seems to have left no mark on the book.[4] Progress on the project was interrupted in 1946–8 by the Foyle Fisheries court case (which involved Moody, Dudley Edwards and other historians as expert witnesses) and by intrigues concerning the plan to create a School of Irish History within the Dublin Institute of Advanced Studies. T.D. Williams[5] replaced O'Doherty in 1949; 29 years old and held in awe by men and women much older, Williams had just been appointed to the chair of Modern History in UCD.

Both the long gestation of *The Great Famine* and its ultimate form are a curious commentary on the writing of Irish history in the 1940s and 1950s. Flawed planning and personality clashes were an important

part of the story, which is told in greater detail elsewhere.[6] Between 1946 and 1950 the project lay virtually dormant, but the ICHS and the editors were prodded into productive action in 1950–1 by queries from civil service officials. The core of the book was submitted to the publishers, Browne & Nolan, in December 1954. Much to the annoyance of the editors, *The Great Famine* missed the Christmas market of 1956, reaching the bookshops on 18 January 1957.

It was widely reviewed, thanks in part to Desmond Williams's influence, and the reviews were favourable. The initial print run of two thousand copies virtually sold out within two years. De Valera, then in opposition, received a complimentary copy. He thanked the editors, though it is reported that when it was read for him – he was virtually blind by that stage – he did not much care for the book. His greater enthusiasm for 'amateur historian' Cecil Woodham-Smith's *The Great Hunger* (1962) tells its own tale. Still the world-wide and enduring success of that more evocative study also points to an opportunity lost by professional Irish historians. If Cecil Woodham-Smith was too melodramatic or 'emotive' on occasion – and Roy Foster in an unkind moment has accused her of being a 'zealous convert'[7] – one cannot occasionally escape the feeling when tackling Edwards and Williams of reading 'a narrative as dry and as cold as a Blue Book'.[8] And yet, though some of the contributors to *The Great Famine* did not share de Valera's liking for *The Great Hunger*, the two studies nicely complement each other. *The Great Famine* may lack the narrative account and descriptive 'feel' so usefully provided by Woodham-Smith, but it is more scholarly, more dispassionate, and more analytical. It is also worth pointing out that three of those involved in the Edwards-Williams project, R.B. McDowell, T.P. O'Neill, and Edwards himself, helped Woodham-Smith in her work, and became firm friends with her.

As its curious sub-title indicates, *The Great Famine: Studies in Irish History* never pretended to be the definitive, narrative account envisaged by de Valera in 1944. Half a century later, that account is still awaited. But the ICHS's own early plans were frustrated in several respects. The eventual list of contributors met one of the aspirations of Moody and Edwards – an ecumenical combination of the best talents available, North and South. But the authors responsible for 'economics' (James Meenan), and 'the place of the famine in Irish history' (the editors themselves), never delivered their texts, and the draft of a contribution by Brian Osborne on English public opinion was rejected after the 'implied condemnation' of Moody.[9] Editorial hopes that other scholars

such as Kenneth Connell of Queen's University, Belfast, and R.C. Geary of the Central Statistics Office would provide chapters never came to fruition either. Perhaps this explains the administrative-historic focus of *The Great Famine*. The core chapters – by Kevin Nowlan, Oliver MacDonagh, Thomas P. O'Neill, and William McArthur – tackle the tragedy largely from the standpoint of the bureaucrat and the legislator. Nor did Edwards and Williams, as editors, ever confront several other important aspects of the Famine's history – the parts played by the churches and the gombeenman, the 'low' politics of moral economy and agrarian unrest, the working of food markets, landlord behaviour, the concept of the Famine as 'watershed', general economic conditions in the United Kingdom during the crisis, the short- and long-term social and economic consequences, the Famine in literature, the Famine in comparative European perspective, to name a few. Since the volume's publication, the researches of Austin Bourke, Raymond Crotty, Mary Daly, James Donnelly, Liam Kennedy, Joel Mokyr, Peter Solar, and Peter Gray, among others – always building on *The Great Famine* – have plugged some of the gaps. But curiously, perhaps, there is very little of the work included here which has been superceded by them. The sections on the pre-famine economy have dated most, though even they can still be read with benefit. In defence of the editors and the contributors to *The Great Famine*, the raw state of Irish historiography in their heyday must again be stressed. As noted above, very few scholarly monographs had been published on the economic and social history of nineteenth-century Ireland before 1944 (or even by 1957), and on the Famine itself little worthwhile had been published since the accounts of Canon John O'Rourke (1874) and W.P. O'Brien (1896).

Inevitably, the contributions to *The Great Famine* bear some of the methodological hallmarks (and a few of the scars) of the 1940s and 1950s. Some of the authors relied mainly on official printed sources and contemporary newspapers, rather than on the 'private' evidence of estate records, parish registers, emigrant letters, folklore, and popular literature. But that accusation cannot be made against O'Neill, Nowlan, or MacDonagh, and the bias is partly accounted for by the more difficult research conditions the authors faced. In the 1940s the National Library's collection of catalogued manuscripts was only a fraction of that available to scholars today; thousands of manuscripts lay in large wooden boxes with their lids screwed down. Only in the early 1950s did nineteenth-century estate records become widely accessible.[10] The hundred-year rule applied to Famine documents in the State Paper Office,

and Irish parishes registers had yet to be microfilmed. Research in London was virtually impossible at a time when some of the authors were at work – in 1945–6.

Another hallmark of the book was the tendency of most authors to shy away from quantitative generalizations or descriptions. The useful map by Thomas P. O'Neill describing the dependence on soup-kitchens by poor law union (p. 242) gives a hint of what might have been done in this respect. Contributors largely ignored the easily available agricultural statistics and failed to exploit quantitative information in the Poor Inquiry or Devon Commission. They emitted conflicting signals on the crucial issue of excess mortality, and offered little information on prices, wages, or agricultural yields. Yet despite such limitations, the book contains a great deal of lasting value. For example, O'Neill's essay on public relief policy has provided a framework for several other researchers to follow. Kevin Nowlan on politics, Oliver MacDonagh on emigration, and Sir William MacArthur on medical aspects of the Famine produced excellent and enduring contributions. O'Neill and MacDonagh, young post-graduate students at University College, Dublin in the mid-1940s, based their chapters on master's dissertations which were commissioned as part of the ICHS project. The dissertations, completed in 1946, were transformed into what would become Chapters IV and VI below in 1950–2. MacDonagh would build on insights gained during his research into the legislation to protect ocean-going passengers during the Famine for his interpretation of nineteenth-century public policy, while O'Neill would become Ireland's acknowledged Famine expert. Kevin Nowlan (Chapter III) was recruited later than MacDonagh and O'Neill, and his able and confident contribution on the political background is largely based on a masters' dissertation completed in 1950. These three chapters provide a foretaste of the quality of scholarship that would emanate later from these academic 'young Turks'. Previous analyses of the Famine, notably those by Canon John O'Rourke (1875) and George O'Brien (1921), had relied largely on the printed word; MacDonagh, Nowlan, and O'Neill were the first to exploit archival material. With them, truly, Famine research came of age.

Sir William MacArthur (Chapter V) was already an established scholar when recruited by the ICHS to write on the medical history of the famine. Belfast-born MacArthur (1884–1964), an enthusiast for the Irish language and former head of the British Army Medical Services, had recently published a paper on 'Famines in Britain and Ireland'.[11] He was one of the first to produce a finished text. Some years later one of the edi-

tors, Desmond Williams, mislaid MacArthur's footnotes, and as a result the excellent chapter on medical history appeared virtually without references (see below, p. 469). Williams allegedly attempted to *plámás* the aggrieved MacArthur by claiming that the words of such a fine historian might stand on their own – which turned out to be correct![12]

Chapter VII by non-historian Roger McHugh on folk memories of the tragedy was largely based on replies to an ambitious questionnaire circulated by the Irish Folklore Commission in 1945. That questionnaire, largely devised by Thomas P. O'Neill, yielded almost four thousand pages of evidence from all over the island.[13] McHugh's contribution, also largely completed in the mid-1940s, is the most vivid and evocative in the book. Highly original in the methodological sense, at least by Irish standards, it prompted Dudley Edwards to note in his diary: '[John] Mitchel's popularity is explainable not because he was merely defiant. It was because he correctly interpreted the feeling of the people'. My own analysis of some of the material convinces me that a critical reading of the folklore evidence would return a more equivocal verdict on popular feeling, but the comment raises the question why Irish historians since – with a few exceptions such as Ken Connell – have been so reluctant to invoke such evidence. The case for folklore and oral history as complements to conventional documentary sources finds ample support in the material presented by McHugh. R.B. McDowell's introductory chapter on the economy on the eve of the Famine is wide-ranging and elegant, even if one of the editors privately believed its 'effort to speak well for government and landlords… [is] a little obvious'.[14] Today's readers may judge for themselves! Chapter II on agriculture by the late Rodney Green was shorter and less thorough than the rest, possibly, as Ken Connell reportedly thought, 'because he [Green] was not interested'.[15] Like MacArthur's and McHugh's chapters, Green's was finished in the first phase of the project.

The final outcome was very much a product of University College, Dublin in its Earlsfort Terrace heyday. Both editors and four of the contributors either worked or had served their time there; Browne & Nolan the publishers also had close connections with UCD. For Dudley Edwards, in whose office some of the contributions lay for many years after their arrival in 1946 or 1947, the project was a recurring preoccupation. But without the commitment and the enthusiasm of his colleagues his Kevin Nowlan, Joyce Padbury, and Maureen Wall (*née* McGeehin),[16] the book almost certainly would never seen the light of day.

In the end, despite repeated resolutions to set aside the necessary time to write what was variously described as an historiographical introduction and an epilogue, neither editor contributed a word to the body of the book, nor did they exercise much editorial control on the individual authors. There were plans to issue a companion volume of source documents but they too were dropped. The brief but broad-ranging and thoughtful introduction that did materialize was 'ghosted' by Kevin Nowlan at Desmond Williams's request.[17] The bibliography owes a good deal to that produced by T.P. O'Neill for his MA thesis,[18] and Joyce Padbury, then an associate of the Department of Modern History, contributed the index. That the index was limited to a list of names and places was the editors' decision, not hers. Overall, it must be said that Edwards and Williams performed their editorial duties in a rather lackadaisical manner; Williams, in particular, had too many other fish to fry in the latter stages of the book's gestation. Yet, despite all this, *The Great Famine*, greater than its parts, is a pioneering and an enduring work.

For an early (and friendly) reviewer, the late Professor Leland Lyons, the book proved how 'the Great Famine was a logical consequence of a vicious system of land-holding, a pitifully backward agriculture, and a social structure which invited disaster'.[19] That reading captured an important, if hidden, message of this book, viz. that populist understanding and nationalist propaganda, fed on the *saeva indignatio* of John Mitchel and Archbishop John MacHale of Tuam, had greatly underestimated the deep-seated social and economic reasons for the disaster. The point needed to be made. Moreover, subsequent research in Irish economic and social history has confirmed many of the findings and speculations of *The Great Famine*. Yet that research would also temper the implication of Lyons' apologetic claim that the Famine was somehow inevitable and that *all* the mortality was unavoidable. Dudley Edwards agonized repeatedly over this issue in his private diaries, though his worries failed to influence the content of the book. For Edwards, the fear of sanitized, 'dehydrated history' was very real. *The Great Famine* largely eschewed accounts of the suffering, the cruelty, and the callousness (on all sides) that marked the late 1840s. No doubt, the contributors were reacting to the melodramatic discourse of populist-nationalist accounts. Yet now, over three decades later, the conundrum glossed over by Edwards & Williams remains: 'though the English may not have actually caused [the famine], it was never possible to explain why the richest and most powerful empire in the world was unable to avert its worst consequences'.[20]

The unhappy history of *The Great Famine*'s long gestation must not spoil the pleasure and benefit to be obtained from reading the final product. The book itself achieved a great deal, and with it, nineteenth-century Irish history reached a new level of professionalism. The delays endured by *The Great Famine* reflected the shifting preoccupations and responsibilities of those involved, and it would be quite unfair to blame those delays on the sensitive nature of the topic. Yet they symbolized the reluctance of Irish historians to confront the horror of that tragic event in the 1940s and 1950s. Ironically, Moody's previously-mentioned shopping-list of 'things to be done in [nineteenth-century] Irish history' included topics such as the 'history of the agricultural labourers and of the urban working class... Ireland's contribution to science, her place in the main political and intellectual movements of contemporary Europe, and Irish expansion overseas', but it had failed to mention the Famine.[21] And between its foundation in 1938 and 1956 *Irish Historical Studies* yielded only two articles on Famine-related topics, both by contributors to this volume. Even in the 1960s those who, like Raymond Crotty (an economist) and Austin Bourke (a meteorologist), wrote on the Great Famine, ploughed a lonely furrow.[22] Professional historians rather frowned on Austin Bourke's research at first, and his doctorate was awarded by the Department of Dairy Science in University College, Cork! Only with the blooming of Irish economic and social history and the increasing interest of outside or foreign-trained scholars in the subject in the 1970s and 1980s has the neglect begun to be made good. Now, all of a sudden, the Famine has become a popular topic for researchers. But there remains plenty to be done. I have appended a bibliography as an indication of what has been accomplished in the interim. Perhaps it will help others contemplating work on the some aspect of the Famine.

As we have seen, *The Great Famine: Studies in Irish History* was a delayed reaction to the Great Famine's centenary. The imminence of that catastrophe's sesquicentennial can be expected to generate more overdue interest in the topic. A research network has been formed in Dublin, several interdisciplinary conferences and workshops are being discussed or planned farther afield, the Strokestown Famine Museum has opened its doors, and there is even talk of new, collaborative volumes! But in the meantime, the classic contributions that follow have provided many of the essential building blocks.

CORMAC Ó GRÁDA