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FAMINE, TRAUMA AND MEMORY[1]

CORMAC Ó GRÁDA

INTRODUCTION

A key theme of the sesquicentennial commemorations of the Great Irish Famine in the mid-1990s was that Irish people everywhere shared a collective or communal memory of that catastrophe. In speeches to the *Oireachtas* (the Irish Houses of Parliament), at Grosse Ile in Québec (where thousands of famine emigrants died in 1847), at the opening of the Irish famine museum at Strokestown (county Roscommon), and elsewhere, President Mary Robinson led the way, arguing that the Famine had defined Irish people's 'will to survive' and their 'sense of human vulnerability'. For Robinson, commemoration was a 'moral act', a means of strengthening bonds between present-day Ireland and its 'diaspora', and of increasing goodwill towards, and concern for, Third World famines.[2] There was also a flip-side to this collective memory. For some at least, the trauma caused by the Famine had long been repressed, whence the need to 'recover' the memory of what had been 'forgotten' since the 1840s. Much of the commentary by politicians, journalists, and poets embodied an understanding of the famine which bears comparison with the historical record, as understood by historians.

Historical scholarship suggests that the impact of the Irish Famine was unequal and divisive. A disaster that struck the poor more than the rich and that pitted neighbour against neighbour is hardly promising material for a communal, collective memory. But

[1] This is a slightly amended version of a paper read to a meeting of *An Cumann le Béaloideas Éireann*/The Folklore of Ireland Society, 6 November 2000. An earlier draft was presented at the Dublin City University Conference on Cultural Trauma and National Identity, 28-9 April 2000. My thanks to Guy Beiner, Michael Laffan, Sarah Maza, Niall Ó Ciosáin, Tim O'Neill, Máire Ní Chiosáin, Brendan Walsh, and Nicholas Williams for helpful comments and to the Head of the Department of Irish Folklore, University College Dublin, for permission to cite manuscript material in the care of the Department.

[2] Two of Mary Robinson's keynote addresses on famine commemoration are available online: http://www.irlgov.ie/oireachtas/Addresses/02Feb1995.htm; http://gos.sbc.edu/r/robinson.html.

surely folklore or the oral tradition represents such a collective memory? Such may well have been the belief of the Irish Folklore Commission (IFC) which began to assemble material on the famine and on much else in the 1930s.[3] I will show, however, that some specific features of famine suffering which might be expected to leave their mark on the oral tradition—such as personal reminiscences of the workhouse or employment on the public works—are reflected only faintly or at a safe distance in the folklore archives. I then turn to collective memory as articulated in the commemorations, and show the tension between the historical and folklore records, on the one hand, and 'memory' and 'trauma', as reflected in speeches and publications, on the other. I find that as famine history the 'collective memory' voiced in the commemoration is in large part artifact or myth. This conclusion is influenced by a reading of some the recent literature on psychotherapy and the historiography of collective memory.

A CATASTROPHE UNEQUALLY SHARED

The Great Irish Famine brought the era of major famines in Ireland to a brutal end.[4] In terms of the proportion of the population killed, though not in absolute terms, this was a big famine by world-historical standards. The human cost of the famine is often captured in two numbers: a million dead and a million emigrated.[5] When set against a population of about 8.5 million, the resonance of these numbers is very powerful. The numbers who received relief of one kind or another also underline the scope of the disaster: nearly one in twelve of the population on the public works at their peak in the spring of 1847; more than one in three on daily soup rations at their peak in July 1847; and over 140,000 in the workhouses and another

[3] N. Ó Ciosáin, 'Famine memory and the popular representation of scarcity', in I. McBride (ed.), *History and Memory in Early Modern Ireland*, Cambridge 2000; D. Ó Giolláin, *Locating Irish Folklore: Tradition, Modernity, Identity*, Cork 2000, Ch. 3.

[4] On the issue of post-famine famines see T. O'Neill, 'The persistence of famine in Ireland', in C. Póirtéir (ed.), *The Great Irish Famine*, Cork 1995, 204-18.

[5] E.g. S. Devereux, 'Famine in the twentieth century', *IDS (University of Sussex)* Working Paper No. 105 (2000), 7.

800,000 on outdoor relief a year later. The sheer scale of these numbers would seem to suggest a disaster that affected the entire population. However, the famine's impact was very uneven; poverty and death were closely correlated, both at local level and in cross-section. In some areas, particularly along the east coast, mortality was low and mainly confined to the first half of 'Black '47'; in others the famine removed one-quarter or one-third of the entire population and normality had still not been restored by 1851. In considering collective memory of the Irish famine a crucial aspect is that, like all famines, it produced a hierarchy of suffering.

As is usually the case when famine strikes, the first to succumb were elderly beggars and vagrants.[6] However, the one-third or so of the population which was made up of farm labourers and mini-farmers and their dependants accounted for most of the famine's dead. These were overwhelmingly the people forced on to the public works and the soup kitchens and into the workhouses by the failure of the potato.

As noted above, there is a tendency to aggregate as victims those who perished and those who emigrated. Such 'adding up' must not be allowed to obscure the point that dying was a much worse fate than emigrating—unless, as on the so-called 'coffin ships' plying the Canadian route in 1847, a significant proportion of those who left died *en route*. Considering famine emigration as a whole the striking point is how, despite the evidence of overcrowding and undernourishment, relatively so few perished *en route* or on arrival. Nor did the migrants fare worse after arrival than those more numerous survivors who remained at home. Moreover, far from being a disaster, emigration relieved what would have been a much worse disaster in its absence. Without the safety valve of North America, far more would have been forced either to remain at home or to move to Great Britain. The consequences may be imagined.[7]

[6] C. Ó Gráda, *Black '47 and Beyond: the Great Irish Famine in History, Economy, and Memory*, Princeton 1999, 39; see too M. Lachiver, *Les années de misère*, Paris 1991, 82-8.

[7] C. Ó Gráda & K. O'Rourke, 'Mass migration as disaster relief: lessons from the Great Irish Famine', *European Review of Economic History* 1(1) (1997), 3-26.

Most emigrants relied on their own savings or on other assets, such as a tenancy or livestock, which could be readily transferred into liquid funds. This implies that only those with some land or capital could afford the move. So, while not denying for a moment that emigrants were also famine casualties, it is also clear that they were more fortunate than the hundreds of thousands locked in by poverty. And yet it is the emigrant rather than the labourer who died at home who has become 'the archetypal figure of the famine'.[8]

Those who perished and those who emigrated were the most obvious victims of the famine. For the rest, landlords fared badly, though not as badly as implied by the historiography. Farmers faced reduced rent bills, but most were hurt by the failure of the potato and the increase in the efficiency wage or effective cost of farm labour. Outside of agriculture workers' suffering varied according to their dependence on the potato for their food and on the rural market for their output. In sum, in rural Ireland there were few 'winners' in the late 1840s. It is more difficult to gauge the impact of the famine on small traders, village usurers and the like. In famines everywhere such people always incur the resentment and wrath of those most at risk. Yet an analysis of the Great Famine's impact on pawnbroking, one activity perhaps representative of such people, suggests that the famine produced an initial rush of business, soon followed, however, by an increasing burden of unredeemed pledges and forced sales. So it is not easy to see any winners there either.[9]

Because they apply broadly similar occupational categories, the population census reports of 1841 and 1851 offer an indication of how different occupations and occupational groups were affected. Given that population is likely to have grown somewhat between 1841 and 1846 the true impact of the famine is not fully captured by the data. Some of the main features are summarised in Table 1A. The overall decline in the labour force in the island as a whole was 19.1 per cent. There were 14.4 per cent fewer farmers, and 24.2 per

[8] D. G. Boyce, *Nineteenth Century Ireland: the Search for Stability*, Dublin 1990, 120.

[9] Ó Gráda, *op. cit.*, Ch. 4.

TABLE 1A:
OCCUPATIONAL CHANGE, IRELAND 1841-1851

OCCUPATION	*1841*	*1851*	*% CHANGE*
Farmers	471,398	403,638	- 14.4
Farm labourers, herds, ploughmen, gardeners	1,362,756	1,032,845	- 24.2
Domestic servants	328,889	260,522	- 20.8
Millers, bakers	11,007	14,490	+31.6
Tavern-keepers, vintners, wine and spirit merchants	7,484	6,070	- 18.9
Huxters, provision dealers, tobacconists	6,515	5,425	- 16.7
Butchers, poulterers, victuallers	9,169	9,115	- 0.6
Dealers (unspecified)	15,347	15,920	+3.7
Shopkeepers (*do.*)	10,732	12,176	+13.5
Merchants (*do.*)	3,257	2,133	- 34.5
Bailiffs	1,398	1,902	+36.1
Rate collectors	182	587	+222.5
Ministering to charity	253	1,898	+650.2
Coffin-makers	8	23	+187.5
Barristers, attorneys	3,326	3,268	- 1.7
Physicians, surgeons	2,850	2,439	- 14.4
Spinners	516,424	112,275	- 78.3
Weavers	122,631	118,559	- 3.3
Shoemakers	55,728	42,742	- 23.3
Sailors, boatmen, pilots	8,756	23,724	+170.9
Paupers, beggars	36,137	41,808	+15.7
All others	537,613	730,064	+35.8
Total	**3,511,860**	**2,841,623**	**-19.1**

Source: 1841 and 1851 census reports

cent fewer farm labourers. The shift in the diet forced by the potato is reflected in the increase in the number of millers and bakers, one group of possible 'winners'. The figures suggest that most trading categories were affected, though the number of traders overall may have held its own. The number of servants dropped by one-fifth. Not surprisingly, given their vulnerability to infectious disease, there were also fewer medical practitioners in 1851. The fate of doctors offers a reminder that, though famine mortality was quite class-specific, it was less so than in modern famines. Not only medical personnel but workhouse officials and clergymen of all denominations succumbed, mainly from typhoid fever. The impact on the legal profession is less expected. The decline in spinning was part exogenous shock, part consequence of the famine. The small number of coffin makers (eight in 1841, twenty-two in 1851) is a reminder that during the famine most coffins were not made by coffin-makers. The mass evictions of the period probably explain why there were more bailiffs in 1851 and the demands made on the poor law why there were more rate-collectors. The increase in the paupers and beggars group is as expected, that in sailors and boatmen less so. Note the significant increase in the 'all other' category, consisting mainly of non-agricultural and more urban occupations.

Table 1B replicates Table 1A for Connacht, the worst affected of Ireland's four provinces. Broadly speaking, the pattern is the same but magnified. The number of farm labourers fell by one-third over the decade, and the huge drop in the number of spinners is also noteworthy. In Connacht, the 'all other' category also increased but only by eight per cent.

These census tables corroborate the point that while it is not easy to identify any significant group of winners in the famine, the suffering was by no means evenly shared. Some historians would go further. W. E. Vaughan insists 'for many life went on normally' during the famine and that 'any local study of the famine should, therefore, keep an eye on that large section of the population who were unaffected by starvation'. Vaughan instances 'not only those who went to the Curragh races in 1847 but those who consumed six

TABLE 1B:
OCCUPATIONAL CHANGE, CONNACHT 1841-1851

OCCUPATION	*1841*	*1851*	*% CHANGE*
Farmers	80,278	69,212	- 13.8
Farm labourers, herds, ploughmen, gardeners	288,206	193,798	- 32.8
Domestic servants	35,484	27,882	- 21.4
Millers, bakers	1,090	1,514	+38.9
Tavern-keepers, vintners, wine and spirit merchants	564	527	- 6.6
Huxters, provision dealers, tobacconists	630	594	- 5.7
Butchers, poulterers, victuallers	1,131	1,027	- 9.2
Dealers (unspecified)	2,558	1,211	- 52.7
Shopkeepers (*do.*)	1,103	1,022	- 7.3
Merchants (*do.*)	231	168	- 27.3
Bailiffs	255	311	+22.0
Rate collectors	1	101	+10100
Ministering to charity	10	372	+3620
Coffin-makers	0	0	-
Barristers, attorneys	83	184	+121.7
Physicians, surgeons	245	183	- 25.3
Spinners	113,998	25,433	- 77.7
Weavers	8,982	3,285	- 63.4
Shoemakers	5,800	3,927	- 32.3
Sailors, boatmen, pilots	1,019	1,404	+37.8
Paupers, beggars	8,183	11,825	+44.5
All other	55,276	58,394	+5.6
Total	**605,127**	**402,374**	**- 33.5**

Source: 1841 and 1851 census reports

million gallons of whiskey in the same year and the hundreds of thousands of farmers who reorganised their farming to cope with the permanent loss of over two-thirds of their potato crop'.[10] He also points to the big increase in the number of second-class houses between 1841 and 1851 ('more than in any subsequent decade of the nineteenth century'), the rise in the number of children at national schools from 456,410 in 1846 to 507,469 in 1848, and the 'slight' decline in the number of houses between 1847 and 1851 (558,000 to 522,000). The point about housing is well taken, even if the increase was greatest in Ulster and in urban areas where the impact of the famine was least. But the rise in the number of school children, which was greatest in the south and west, 'may be ascribed, to a considerable degree, to the fact of food having been distributed by the British Relief Association, to the children attending a large number of the National Schools, especially in the south and west of Ireland'.[11] Perversely, that reflects the gravity of the famine, not its 'invisibility'.

Vaughan's revisionism was supported by L. M. Cullen in a *bravura* address to the Douglas Hyde Summer School in 1996:[12]

> There was no central menace to existence at large. Comfortable people lived their normal lives . . . Church building . . . reflected the perspective that life remained quite normal for many and for institutions . . . The 1847 general election was conducted normally and on the basis of normal political issues. One Waterford paper reported in relation to the conditions in one area that 'we since had not room, owing to the press of parliamentary and other reports, to return to the subject as promised'. The priorities were clear.

This may exaggerate the degree to which people were fully insulated from the disaster, but it is a reminder that for some the famine did not last long and was not life-threatening.

[10] W. E. Vaughan, 'Reflections on the Great Famine', *Ulster Local Studies*, 17(2) (1995), 7-8.

[11] British Parliamentary Papers, 'Fifteenth report of the commissioners of national education for Ireland (for the year 1848)', [1066.] XXIII (1849), 3.

[12] L. M. Cullen, 'The politics of the famine and famine historiography', in *Comhdháil an Chraoibhín 1996*, Roscommon 1997, 24.

Not only are famines uneven: they are also, always and everywhere, deeply *divisive* tragedies. The charity and solidarity that bind communities together are strengthened for a while, but break as the crisis worsens: hospitality declines, crime and cruelty increase, as do child abandonment and infanticide. Examples abound in the literature of appalling inhumanity and heartlessness. A chronicler wrote of a famine in the Russian city of Novgorod in 1230: 'There was no kindness among us, but misery and unhappiness; in the streets unkindness to one another, at home anguish, seeing children crying for bread and others dying'. At the height of the French famine of 1693-4 Louis Jacquelin, a haberdasher on his way to a fair, was killed in a forest near Poitiers by a gang of soldiers, 'who stole his trunk and his money and beat him to death'. In Lyons, in 1709, a note attached to an abandoned infant read 'This girl is called Claudine, aged three years. Necessity obliges me to expose her. I hope when the times change to get her back'. A survivor of the Great Finnish Famine of 1868 reminisced how 'the flow of beggars was so great that the farmers became quite tired of them' and how they have themselves 'only scraps of food'. On the streets of Leningrad in 1941-2 'deadly criminals attacked people for their ration cards'. In Somalia in the early 1990s, the notorious 'technicals', heavily-armed thugs in trucks, terrorised the poor. In Burgessbeg, near Nenagh in county Tipperary, on the night of 19 January, 1848, farmer Denis Gorman bludgeoned to death one Mary Ryan, a destitute woman, for stealing 'a few sheaves of wheat' from his haggard. There is much more in the same vein from Ireland in the 1840s. All too often hospitality was abandoned and private charity dwindled as the crisis was prolonged. Instead of *ar scáth a chéile a mhaireann na daoine*—as the saying goes—'it became a question of everyone for himself.'[13]

[13] E. Christiansen, *The Northern Crusades* (new edition), Harmondsworth 1997, 10; Lachiver, *op. cit.*, 53; W. Gregory Monahan, *Year of Sorrows: the Great Famine of 1709 in Lyon*, Columbus, Ohio 1993, 90; A. Häkkinen, 'On attitudes and living strategies in the Finnish countryside in the years of famine 1867-68', in *id.* (ed.), *Just a Sack of Potatoes? Crisis Experiences in European Societies, Past and Present*, Helsinki 1992, 156; H. Salisbury, *The 900 Days: the Siege of Leningrad*, London 1969, 482; *Freeman's Journal*, 24 January 1848; C. Ó Gráda, *An Drochshaol: Béaloideas agus Amhráin*, Dublin 1994; *id.*, *Black '47*, Ch. 6.

FOLKLORE AND MEMORY

The Great Famine centennial led to the Irish Folklore Commission circulating a questionnaire on famine folklore, the responses to which provided the raw material for Roger McHugh's pioneering study.[14] Asking folklore or oral tradition to bridge a gap of a century or more and generate reliable evidence on the famine was asking a lot. The long gap between the event and the collection of the evidence allowed ample time for confusion, forgetting, and obfuscation. It also virtually guaranteed contamination by extraneous data. The variable quality of this source and some of its pitfalls have recently been noted, rather crudely by myself and with considerably greater sophistication by Niall Ó Ciosáin.[15] And just as the questions posed of the archive by modern scholarship are shaped by current intellectual and ideological concerns, the material on the famine collected by the Irish Folklore Commission in its heyday in the 1930s and 1940s reveals as much about the concerns of the 1940s as it does about the 1840s. Such considerations inform the U.S. historian Peter Novick's scepticism of memoirs of the Holocaust collected in recent years by Steven Spielberg and others. An added consideration, given the subject matter, is the memory loss possibly caused by the famine itself. Psychiatric research suggests that adult survivors of catastrophes such as earthquakes 'often show considerable memory impairment'. Memories of more protracted catastrophes such as war or famine may be weighted towards their early phases. Moreover, some traumatised victims may be reluctant to talk, while more may be silenced by the

[14] R. McHugh, 'The famine in folklore', in R. D. Edwards & T. D. Williams (eds.), *The Great Famine: Studies in Irish History*, Dublin 1956, 391-406. According to its Annual Report for 1945-1946, the Irish Folklore Commission was asked by the committee behind the publication of this volume to undertake the collection of oral tradition about the Great Famine. [*D'iarr an Choiste [sic] atá i mbun an leabhair ar an nGorta (atá le foilsiú an bhliain seo chúinn) ar an gCoimisiún cabhrú leó san obair le heolas agus seanchas i dtaobh an Ghorta a mhaireann fós ar bhéalaibh na ndaoine a chruinniú. Dob oiriúnach an ócáid chuige sin é, agus do thoiligh an Coimisiún ar thabhairt fé cheistiúchán den tsaghas san.*]

[15] Ó Gráda, *op. cit.* (1994); Ó Ciosáin, *op. cit.*

reluctance of non-victims to listen.[16] These are serious problems. And yet the folklore record at its best is vivid, harrowing, telling and, sometimes, intriguing and puzzling. Rejecting what it has on offer would be going too far.[17]

Half a century after the material was collected, a number of scholars re-visited the folklore archive materials for new insights. It provided the raw material for Patricia Lysaght's articles on the impact of the famine on women and Carmel Quinlan's re-analysis of the IFC famine questionnaire.[18] Lysaght's strategy was to draw from the archive at large in order to flesh out a story-line or a generalisation. Inevitably, perhaps, the outcome was a somewhat clichéd *collage* of Irishwomen as models of compassion and 'heroic self-sacrifice', with the twist that they were also 'women of power' who cursed evil-doers such as evicting landlords and land-grabbers.[19] But given the unequal and divisive character of the famine, should the archive be expected to yield an 'identikit' famine woman? And if it did so, would this not be a worrying weakness? Or is it that the quest for such an identikit has conditioned the reading of the evidence? While Lysaght's focus on a sub-group rather than on the nation is a step in the right direction,[20] the implicit double assumption in her approach that Irishwomen were similarly affected in the 1840s and similarly remembered a century or so later is questionable. The same tendency to generalise is present in Carmel Quinlan's recent analysis of the archive materials:[21]

[16] P. Novick, *The Holocaust and Collective Memory*, New York 1999, 83-4, 274-5; J. Kotre, *White Gloves: How We Create Ourselves through Memory*, New York 1996, 137.

[17] Compare Ó Gráda, *op. cit.* (1994), and G. Beiner, 'Bodhaire Uí Laoghaire: oral history and contemporary Irish historiography', *Pages: Postgraduate Research in Progress*, 6 (1999), 9-21.

[18] Patricia Lysaght, 'Perspectives on women during the Great Irish Famine from the oral tradition', *Béaloideas* 64/65 (1996/7), 63-130; *id.*, 'Women and the Great Famine', in A. Gribben, *The Great Famine and the Irish Diaspora in America*, Amherst 1999, 21-47; Carmel Quinlan, 'A punishment from God? The famine in the centenary folklore questionnaire', *The Irish Review*, no. 19 (1996).

[19] Lysaght, *op. cit.* (1966/7), 43-4.

[20] Compare J. Fentress & C. Wickham, *Social Memory*, Oxford 1992.

[21] Quinlan, *op. cit.*, 84.

> The inability of a society to bury its dead obviously leaves a deep scar on the imagination of the people . . . The testimony is an echo from an earlier generation. It seems to have an air of detachment about it which perhaps comes from the inability of survivors to confront the sheer horror of the famine; instead they accepted it in a fatalistic way as the will of God.

It was not 'society', however, but the very poor in that society who were unable to bury their dead. Nor were the better-off forced to confront 'the sheer horror of the famine' first-hand like the poor. Nor had they the same need for fatalism.

Both of these studies *impose* a collective framework on Great Famine folklore. An alternative approach is to seek out the *range* or *kaleidoscope* of memories or evidence on particular topics. I deal here with how three aspects of the famine are represented in the folklore archive. I rely mainly on a simple analysis of Cathal Póirtéir's two *compendia* of famine material.[22]

(i) The public works

As noted earlier, at their peak the public works employed nearly seven hundred thousand people, or one-twelfth of the entire population. In the poorer parts of the island, over-represented in the folklore archive holdings, they employed a higher proportion and, of course, a higher proportion still of the adult male population. Over forty accounts (nineteen in Irish, twenty-four in English) in Póirtéir's compendia refer to the public works. Some of them are striking and rich in detail; most are critical of the authorities. Only *three* narrators in Póirtéir's *compendia* refer to an ancestor who participated in the works, however. One, Martin Manning from Carrowholly near Westport in county Mayo, was the son of a ganger or foreman on the local works. The other two refer to labourers. Mick Kelly's father worked on a relief scheme near Castletowngeoghegan in county Westmeath, while John Doyle's grandfather worked for four pence a day building the ditch at 'the straight mile' near Aughrim in south county Wicklow.[23] A Béara

[22] Póirtéir, *op. cit.*; *id.*, *Glórtha ón nGorta*, Dublin 1996.

[23] Póirtéir, *op. cit.* (1995), 151, 155.

woman's father-in-law also worked on the works as a young man, but somebody complained that he did not need relief—'*go bhféadfadh sé sin mairiúint sa bhaile*' ['that that fellow could survive at home']—so he lost his place.[24] In all other instances, 'memory' of the public works as reflected in these accounts is not only distanced in time, but vicarious also in the sense that the memory was not autobiographical even a few generations back. I do not know why this was so. Perhaps 'silence' or 'denial' had something to do with it. Hidden selection bias in the collectors and questionnaire respondents of the 1930s and 1940s is another possible reason: insofar as they may have resorted to the most articulate in the local community, they may have also inadvertently missed the descendants of those worst affected by the disaster.

(ii) Thieves and their victims

Taken as a whole, the material on thieves and thieving in the archive is less distanced. Here several accounts are by the descendants of perpetrators, victims, or potential victims. The narrators include a county Wicklow woman whose grandfather stole a leg of mutton from the pot of a well-to-do farmer in Slievenamoe and a county Roscommon woman whose father stole some oatmeal. Representing the victims, an old man from Tullaghan, county Leitrim, lamented the theft of his parents' potatoes, a 'cruel wrong', while Colm Ó Caoidheáin related how his grand-uncle was robbed of oatmeal in county Galway by a woman who cut a hole in the sack he was carrying. We learn how Galwayman Pádraig Ó Discín's grandfather let a thief away with meal, while a Wicklowman's grandfather, who drove a horse and car for the local landlord, was protected by guards. Mairéad Ní Mhionacháin's mother, then only a little girl, spent many nights guarding the family potato plot in Béara against thieves.[25] A striking, if understandable, feature is that the descendants' victims never name the perpetrators. The accounts are

[24] M. Verling, *Béarach Mná ag Caint: Seanchas Mhairéad Ní Mhionacháin*, Indreabhán 1999, 50.

[25] Póirtéir, *op. cit.* (1995), 68-9, 71, 72, 78-9, 82; Póirtéir, *op. cit.* (1996), 97; Verling, *op. cit.*, 49.

divided in their perspectives on the morality of the theft, with a majority showing some sympathy for the thief.

(iii) The workhouse

Memories of the workhouse have the same vicarious quality as those describing the public works. This may come as a surprise, given how large the workhouse looms in both contemporary commentary and the historiography of the Irish famine. And so it should loom large: over one in five of those who perished from the famine died in a workhouse or in a workhouse hospital.[26] Moreover, workhouse deaths represented only a fraction of those admitted and workhouse survivors were unlikely to have had the resources to emigrate afterwards. Therefore, a significant number of the famine's survivors in Ireland must have had personal experience of the workhouse. It is curious to find, then, how distanced are the folklore archive accounts of the workhouse. The following excerpts are representative:[27]

> Patrick Reilly, Culleagh, tells of people found along the roads weak with hunger, grass on their mouths and who were brought to the poorhouse (Belturbet, county Cavan).
>
> Auld Mrs Corcoran, the wife of Peter Corcoran, went into Granard workhouse and took three children out of it (county Longford).
>
> *Ní babhta nó dhó a d'airigh mé m'athair críonna, a chónaigh anseo thíos i Maigh Adhair agus a bhí ina fhear phósta le linn an Ghorta, dhá rá go raibh oiread sin ag tarraingt ar na poorhousaí seo nárbh fhéidir óstas a thabhairt dá leath.*
> ['More than once I heard my grandfather, who lived down here in Magh Adhair and who was a married man during the Famine, say that there were so many making for the poorhouses that there wasn't accommodation for half of them.'] (Luogh, county Clare).

[26] T. Guinnane & C. Ó Gráda, 'The workhouses and Irish famine mortality', in T. Dyson & C. Ó Gráda (eds.), *Famine Demography: Evidence from the Past and the Present*, forthcoming.

[27] See Póirtéir, *op. cit.* (1995), 116-31; Póirtéir, *op. cit.* (1996), 157-62.

Bhí seanchapall ag...Beait, agus nuair a fhaigheadh sé an seans, na daoine a bhíodh ag dul go dtí an workhouse (na mBeathach), capall Bheait Rua a chuireadh ann iad.
['Bat had an old horse, and when the opportunity arose, it was Foxy Bat's horse that would convey people to the Beathach workhouse.'] (Caherdaniel, county Kerry).

Anthony O'Dwyer's father told him that he saw people dead, dying and staggering about at a rest house at Knockroe, a short distance on the Cashel side of Golden (county Tipperary).

To be buried in a workhouse coffin was regarded as a slur on the friend and on the deceased (Ballymoe, county Galway).

'Tá brand *an Union ort', adéarfaí le duine* ['You have the brand of the Union on you', is what people would be told.'] (Caherdaniel, county Kerry).

Literally *none* of these accounts conveys a real sense of 'having been there'. There is virtually nothing about living conditions inside the workhouse walls. Even when the account is specific, it is always about somebody outside the narrator's family. Not a single informant refers to an ancestor who was a pauper inmate during the famine, the closest being one Johnny Callaghan, whose father worked as a baker in Castlerea workhouse during the famine.[28] This 'silence' may in part reflect the enduring shame associated with the workhouse. Once again, however, an unintended bias in the selection of informants may also be responsible. For whatever reason the memories of those who suffered most are simply not represented in these folklore accounts.

A COLLECTIVE FAMINE MEMORY?

The material collected by the Irish Folklore Commission in the 1930s and 1940s—distanced, fractious and individual—is quite distinct in theme from 'memory' as represented in much of the

[28] Póirtéir, *op. cit.* (1995), 128.

famine commemoration of the 1990s. As noted earlier, the theme of a collective memory of the famine was a key feature of the commemorations. Popularised by President Mary Robinson, it was echoed repeatedly by Minister of State Avril Doyle, by academics such as Kevin Whelan and David Lloyd, and by representatives of the Third World charities. *Irish Times* journalist John Waters, California state senator Tom Hayden, pop singer Sinéad O'Connor and others identified with a bleaker version of the same theme, stressing repressed memory and communal trauma.

When asked by a CBS reporter in Somalia in 1992 'why there were so many Irish aid workers on the ground, and such an Irish interest in Somalia', Mary Robinson replied with 'the story of the Choctaw Indians: how they as a poor dispossessed people had raised over seven hundred dollars for the relief of Irish famine victims in the 1840s, and how Irish people had a folk memory of famine which helped us identify with countries like Somalia'.[29] Elsewhere President Robinson proclaimed that the famine more than any other event 'shaped us as a people. It defined our will to survive. It defined our sense of human vulnerability. It remains one of the strongest, most poignant links of memory and feeling that connects us to our diaspora. It involves us still in an act of remembrance which increasingly, is neither tribal nor narrow'. Fr Aengus Finucane of *Concern* saw the anniversary as 'provid[ing] us with an opportunity to reach across the centuries and, in the name of our own Famine dead, try to heal the hurts of history'.[30]

'We are a First World country with a Third World memory of famine, dislocation, and exile . . . Our own Famine echoes are constantly with us', proclaimed Minister of State Avril Doyle in 1996. Indeed the phrase 'a First World country with a Third World memory' became one of Minister of State Doyle's key phrases. Elsewhere she talked of the famine as 'an event which traumatised this country', echoing Kevin Whelan's claim that 'the famine

[29] Mary Robinson, *A Voice for Somalia*, Dublin 1992, 23.

[30] Concern Worldwide (1995), *'A Glimmer of Light': An Overview of Great Hunger Commemorative Events*, Dublin 1995, 2.

experience burned itself into the Irish character'. And again Kevin Whelan:[31]

> The frail Famine voices now reach us across an aching void. We need to amplify that acoustic; in hearing them attentively, we might reclaim our Famine ghosts from their enforced silence and invisibility. In doing so, we can rescue them from the enormous condescension of posterity, paying them the respect which their lonely deaths so signally lacked. That very gesture of reconnection may alleviate a cultural loneliness we do not even know we have and liberate us into a fuller and more honest sense of ourselves, showing us how we got to be where we are, even as we leave it behind.

In 1997, Tom Hayden dedicated a collection of commemorative essays on the Irish famine 'to all those who have had to live with their deepest story denied'. One of his contributors, literary critic David Lloyd, referred to 'our memory of hunger' and 'its psychic and corporeal costs'. Another, poet Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, referred to 'our recovery from the collective trauma of the Famine', while novelist Seán Kenny wrote of 'restoring our memory of the Famine'.[32] Elsewhere historian Christine Kinealy[33] has referred approvingly to ongoing work on the 'healing process' and 'post-colonial traumatic stress' by Irish-Californian psychotherapist, Dr Garrett O'Connor. Sinéad O'Connor's 1995 rap poem offers an extreme case of this approach to collective famine memory. For O'Connor 'all the old men in the pubs' and 'all our young people on drugs' were the product of the famine and the resultant post-traumatic stress disorder. The Irish were like 'a child that got itself bashed in the face' and 'if there ever is gonna (*sic*) be healing there has to be remembering'.

[31] A. Doyle, in EC Humanitarian Office, *Ireland's Famine: Commemoration and Awareness*, Brussels 1996, 3, 7; *id.*, 'Caint an Aire', in *Comhdháil an Chraoibhín 1996*, 6; *The Detroit News*, 20 August 1995; http://www.discribe.ca/famine/comittee.htm.

[32] T. Hayden (ed.), *Irish Hunger: Personal Reflections on the Legacy of the Famine*, Boulder 1997, 9, 46, 69, 190.

[33] Christine Kinealy, 'The Great Irish Famine—a dangerous memory?', in Gribben, *op. cit.*, 244, 252.

I have quoted these statements to give the flavour of the discourse on collective memory. Note throughout the collective rhetoric of 'we', 'us', 'all those', 'ourselves', 'Irish character', 'Irish people', 'this country', 'a country with a memory', 'our own', 'our memory'. This is collective or communal memory with a vengeance. But such inclusive, collective language occludes the uneven and divisive character of the famine.

The view that their shared famine suffering sensitised Irish people, taken as a whole, to suffering in the Third World or, more prescriptively, should spur them to greater generosity was also a constant echo during the sesquicentennial commemoration. 'Inherited values trigger our sympathy for anyone, anywhere facing starvation', according to Michael Callopy of the Cobh Heritage Centre. A Dublin nurse told a Boston physician that 'she came to Rwanda because her grandmother never let her forget'. Foreign Minister David Andrews has described the 'Irish people's . . . generosity of thought and action' as 'one of the few positive legacies we gained from our terrible experiences during the Great Famine last century'. In the same vein Stephen Jackson, director of UCC's International Famine Centre, claims that Ireland's bond with famine-afflicted places stems from 'the sense that we were as they are'.[34] In Avril Doyle's rendition, 'As such, we as a people have contributed significantly on both a personal and national level to relieving global hunger'. On a more prescriptive note, Minister of State Doyle urged, in the rather excessive style typical of her commemorative speeches, that 'commemoration of the Famine should equally sensitise us to current social inequality and injustice, notably our travellers and urban underclass, whose marginalised positions so eerily replicate that of the rural underclass of pre-famine Ireland'. A year later, no longer junior minister, Doyle would say: 'We are now giving back what we received during our own darkest hour . . . The migration of families to relief centres in Korea and other areas of famine is similar to our people's emigration to the

[34] *The Detroit News*, 20 August 1995 (Michael Collopy); *Parliamentary Debates Seanad Éireann* (*PDSÉ*), vol. 152, no. 16, 27 November 1997 (David Andrews); *Boston Herald*, 7 May 2000 (Stephen Jackson).

workhouses'.[35] In more sober tones, a 1993 Department of Foreign Affairs policy document states that 'our historical experience, the absence of colonial or exploitative interest, the fact that we experienced famine within the relatively recent past . . . have made us especially aware of and sensitive to the economic and social needs of developing countries'. Such rhetoric had a clearly prescriptive role, but whether the famine commemorations spurred the public at large into greater generosity towards Third World NGOs remains a moot point.[36] Moreover, it bears noting, given all the claims to the contrary, that the supposed link between famine memory and generosity in the face of Third World hunger is really for the most part a tradition invented in the comparatively recent past (in the 1970s and 1980s).[37] If a historical link is required, a century-long tradition of Irish missionary activity far afield, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, has a stronger claim. However, such a 'collective memory' would be out of place in a modern, outward-looking Ireland.[38]

[35] Doyle, *op. cit.*, 7; *id.*, EC Humanitarian Office, 8; *Parliamentary Debates Seanad Éireann*, vol. 152, no. 16, 27 November 1997.

[36] Department of Foreign Affairs, *Irish Aid: Consolidation and Growth: A Strategy Plan*, Dublin 1993, 10 (I am grateful to Monica O'Connor of the Department for a photocopy). The sums (in £1,000s) received by *Trócaire* and *Concern* in donations and church door collections, as given in their annual reports, were as follows:

Trócaire		*Concern*	
Year	Collected	Year	Collected
1993/4	4,937	1990	4,430
1994/5	5,299	1991	7,368
1995/6	4,920	1992	16,434
1996/7	4,936	1993	9,013
1997/8	6,377	1994	13,491
1998/9	7,541	1995	6,764
		1996	7,478
		1997	8,190

Note: accounting years end on 28/29 February

[37] Note, however, how in November 1963 Muintir Mhuigheo organised a lecture by Cecil Woodham-Smith about her experiences in writing *The Great Hunger* in aid of the Irish Freedom from Hunger Campaign (see Ó Gráda, 'Making history in Ireland in the 1940s and 1950s: the saga of *The Great Famine*', *The Irish Review*, No. 12 [1992], 97).

[38] Ó Gráda, 'The Great Famine and other famines', in *id.* (Ed.), *Famine 150: Commemorative Lecture Series*, Dublin 1997, 129-31.

The rhetoric of famine memory today, such as it is (or was a few years ago), is all-inclusive. It is as if virtually all those living in Ireland during the famine were forced to die or emigrate, with knock-on effects on their traumatised descendants. But how could the memory of such an uneven and divisive disaster as the Irish famine be truly collective? How could such a range of experiences have spawned a common memory? Surely, only by glossing over and filtering out much of the history of the famine?

Nor is the correlation between the intensity of memory of the famine and the injury suffered by any means straightforward. As argued earlier, those who managed to emigrate to America were *relatively* fortunate, yet it is their 'descendants'—real or vicarious—who 'remember' the most. But this is as much a reflection of modern American culture as it is of the sufferings of these people's ancestors in Black '47. In their campaigns for compulsory Irish famine studies some American-Irish activists are now competing with Black and Jewish activists in a sordid victimhood stakes.[39]

When French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs coined the term 'collective memory' in the 1920s he was interested in how the present conditions a community's understanding of its past. Modern historians' fascination with memory and tradition owes much to his insights.[40] For Halbwachs, there was something inherently ahistorical about shared group memories. They lasted only insofar as they adapted to what the American psychologist John Kotre calls 'the needs of changing times'. Typically, such shared memories gloss over complexities and awkward evidence, they are prone to being highly partisan, and they make events in the distant past seem like they happened just yesterday. Collective memory, informed by a simplistic understanding of the past, always tells us more about

[39] J. S. Donnelly, 'The construction of the memory of the famine in Ireland and the Irish diaspora, 1850-1900', *Éire-Ireland*, XXXI (1996), 26-61; Novick, *op. cit.*, 9-10; compare http://www.irishholocaust.org/.

[40] See, e. g., P. Nora, 'Between memory and history: *les lieux de memoire*', *Representations*, no. 26 (1979); E. Hobsbawm & T. Ranger (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge 1983; Fentress & Wickham, *op. cit.*; J. R. Gillis (ed.), *Commemorations: the Politics of National Identity*, Princeton 1994; P. O'Carroll, 'Re-membering 1798', in E. Slater & M. Peillon (eds.), *Memories of the Present: A Sociological Chronicle of Ireland, 1997-1998*, Dublin 2000, 15-23.

the present than the past. Historical scholarship, by contrast, is complex and multifaceted and ambiguous, though hardly value-free either.[41] One has only to compare collective memories in the two Irelands of, say, William of Orange and Oliver Cromwell with the ambivalent verdicts of historians.

'Collective trauma' is a concept of more recent vintage. In the hands of John Waters, Tom Hayden and others cited earlier, it acquired a particular meaning: the transfer of the early Freudian notion of repressed memory from a micro to a macro context. John Waters justified this transfer by declaring that when he had asked psychoanalysts whether the trauma and repression that affected individual people 'might also be true of peoples, of societies, of nations . . . [t]he answer . . . ha[d] invariably been yes'.[42] This understanding of collective trauma misses an important aspect emphasised elsewhere in the literature: that is, communal trauma as a blow 'that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of community'.[43] Analyses of recent natural disasters such as Chernobyl, the civil war in Mozambique, or the Exxon Valdez oil spill focus on the resultant disarticulation of the cultural systems of the affected communities.

But these are all recent disasters; so perhaps it comes as no surprise that in the Irish case the focus is on the 'repressed' memory of an event that took place long ago. Nobody doubts the psychic scars inflicted by an event like Chernobyl or the Great Famine on those who had to live through them, or even on the following generation. Arguing that Ireland in the mid-1990s was in need of 'recovered memory therapy' (RMT) because of the famine is quite another matter, however. What, one may wonder, is the life span of a collective trauma? How does one measure its intensity? Were Irishmen and Irishwomen in the mid-1840s still emotionally affected by the massive famine that struck the country in 1740-1?[44]

[41] Kotre, *op. cit.*, 238-9; Novick, *op. cit.*, 4-5.

[42] Cited in Hayden, *op. cit.*, 27.

[43] K. Erickson, *A New Species of Trouble: the Human Experience of Modern Disasters*, New York 1994, 23: cited in www.aacts.org/arts/art55.htm.

[44] D. Dickson, *Arctic Ireland: the Extraordinary Story of the Great Frost and Forgotten Famine of 1740-1*, Belfast 1997.

When did the French stop suffering the trauma of the massive famines of 1693-4 and 1709?

But the argument suffers from several other weaknesses. First, it forgets that RMT has been subjected to a vigorous critique over the past decade or so. In the course of the high profile 'memory wars' critics have cast serious doubt on the empirical underpinnings of both the original Josef Breuer/Sigmund Freud version and its more recent re-incarnation (as represented in, say, the best-selling *The Courage to Heal* by Ellen Bass and Laura Davis). Critics have also accused the RMT approach of simply ignoring the organic or biological component of mental illness. Instead of taking account of what UCLA sociologist and psychoanalyst Jeffrey Prager (a sympathetic critic) dubs 'the extraordinary complexity of individual subjectivity', trauma therapy 'tend[ed] to reduce all understanding of the human psyche to external material conditions that impinge on the person'. Prager deems trauma diagnosis and RMT clumsy tools against the complexity of the individual character. They over-emphasise 'the effects of the external world... and dispute memory's subjectivity'.[45]

Another, more fundamental problem is the transfer from the individual to some national or communal psyche. When a whole group is subject to precisely the same shock this might make sense, though it is not easy to think of examples. In a recent contribution urban sociologist and historian Richard Sennett offers a microstudy of a group of white-collar workers dismissed by IBM in upstate New York, treating them as 'people who have shared common injuries at the hands of the modern economy and are seeking to interpret them' when they meet for coffee.[46] Fair enough, perhaps. But one of the points at issue here is that the famine did *not* inflict 'common injuries' at the time, never mind across the generations.

[45] E. Showalter, *Hysteries: Hysterical Epidemics and Modern Culture*, London 1997, 155-8; J. Prager, *Presenting the Past*, Cambridge, Mass. 1998, 131-3; F. Crews, *Unauthorized Freud: Doubters Confront a Legend*. Harmondsworth 1998; M. Borch-Jacobsen, 'How a fabrication differs from a lie', *London Review of Books*, 22(8), 13 April 2000, 3-7.

[46] R. Sennett, 'Disturbing memories', in P. Fara & K. Patterson (eds.), *Memory: the Darwin College Lectures*, Cambridge 1998, 15, 22.

And even supposing, for the sake of argument, that the famine inflicted the same shock on everybody, we are still left with the problem that the concept of communal trauma leaves no room for the subjectivity of the individual psyche. A given shock is supposed to influence everybody, and thus be remembered by everybody, in the essentially same way.

CONCLUSION

Peter Novick's recent reminder that collective memory is subject to 'memory spasms' that coincide with anniversaries certainly rings a bell regarding the Irish famine sesquicentennial commemorations of the mid-1990s. Equally apposite is his denial that 'the flurry of commemorations on such occasions doesn't signify that we're in the presence of important collective memory'.[47] The famine commemorations and the collective memory they articulated even got the chronology of the famine wrong. They began too soon, in 1995, and came to an abrupt end in 1997, glossing over the awkward historical reality that people were still dying of famine-related causes in some parts of Ireland into 1850 and even 1851. As a friend put it at the time, a new form of famine fever in 1995 gave way to new form of famine fatigue a year or two later. Then it was on to the next collective memory. Now collective memory of the Irish famine has presumably gone into hibernation for a few more decades. If it re-awakens in 2045 or so its concerns will be different and so will its interpretation of the past.

[47] Novick, *op. cit.*, 4.