

## Interpretations of the Famine

Based on Peter Gray, *The Irish Famine*, New Horizons, 0-5003-057-7, pp 126-27, 178-82

### Three positions

The meaning of the Great Famine has been contested by historians from the 1850s to the present day.

#### 1. Nationalist perspective

To some, it is a source of nationalist anger representing the ultimate case of British oppression of the Irish people, a view first passionately stated in the nineteenth century by those involved in the struggle for Irish independence, particularly John Mitchel.

#### 2. Revisionism

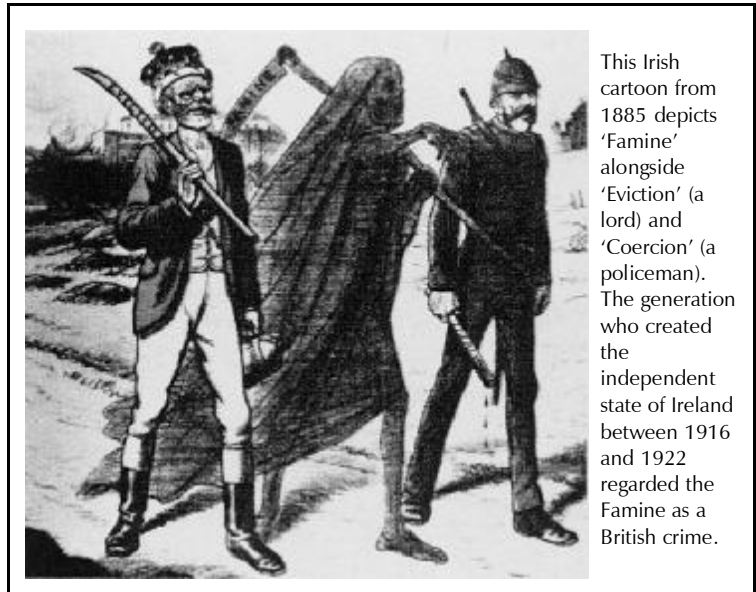
For others, professional historians born in an independent Ireland and former students of the Institute of Historical Research in London, the British relationship is not paramount. For them, the Famine was a historical problem to be coolly dissected and demythologized. Anxious to wean the Irish public away from myths of the past, the revisionists tended to play down the importance of the Famine, or suggested that it was somehow inevitable and not the fault of the British government

#### 3. Post-revisionism

Since the 1980s, other historians have been influenced by new economic and statistical techniques and the realities of hunger and poverty in the modern world. They have challenged the revisionist view and have endorsed neither the wilder claims of the Mitchelite tradition, nor 'the complacent platitudes' that succeeded them.

### Three texts reflecting the historical debate

1. The nationalist interpretation: John Mitchel strongly condemned British policy in Ireland, 1860
2. The revisionist response & interpretation: from the foreword to *The Great Famine*, 1956
3. The post-revisionist interpretation: Cormac Ó Gráda on Famine historiography, 1988



## 1. Nationalist interpretation: John Mitchel strongly condemned British policy in Ireland

The Famine became central to nationalist thinking with the publication in 1860 of John Mitchel's *The Last Conquest of Ireland (Perhaps)*.

- Mitchel (below) blamed Irish depopulation on deliberate British policy.
- His vivid but one-dimensional interpretation endured because it served the deep psychological and political needs of the post-Famine generation.

John Mitchel, *The Last Conquest of Ireland (Perhaps)*, 1860

[A] million and a half of men, women and children, were carefully, prudently, and peacefully slain by the English government. They died of hunger in the midst of abundance, which their own hands created; and it is quite immaterial to distinguish those who perish in the agonies of famine itself from those who died of typhus fever, which in Ireland is always caused by famine.

Further, I have called it an artificial famine: that is to say, it was a famine which desolated a rich and fertile island, that produced every year abundance and superabundance to sustain all her people and many more. The English, indeed, call that famine a 'dispensation of Providence;' and ascribe it entirely to the blight of the potatoes. But potatoes failed in like manner all over Europe; yet there was no famine save in Ireland. The British account of the matter, then, is first, a fraud - second, a blasphemy. The Almighty, indeed,

sent the potato blight, but the English created the famine....

The subjection of Ireland is now probably assured until some external shock shall break up that monstrous commercial firm, the British Empire; which, indeed, is a bankrupt firm, and trading on false credit, and embezzling the goods of others, or robbing on the highway, from Pole to Pole, but its doors are not yet shut; its cup of abomination is not yet running over. If any American has read this narrative, however, he will never wonder hereafter when he hears an Irishman in America fervently curse the British Empire. So long as this hatred and horror shall last - so long as our island refuses to become, like Scotland, a contented province of her enemy, Ireland is not finally subdued. The passionate aspiration for Irish nationhood will outlive the British empire.



## 2. The revisionist response & interpretation: from the foreword to *The Great Famine*

R. Dudley Edwards & T. Desmond Williams (eds.), *The Great Famine: Studies in Irish History 1845-52*, 1956

It is difficult to know how many men and women died in Ireland in the famine years between 1845 and 1852. Perhaps all that matters is the certainty that many, very many, died. The Great Famine was not the first nor the last period of acute distress in Irish history. The Great Famine may be seen as but a period of greater misery in a prolonged age of suffering, but it has left an enduring mark on the folk memory because of its duration and severity. The famine is seen as the source of many woes, the symbol of the exploitation of a whole nation by its oppressors. If only because of its importance in the shaping of Irish national thought, the famine deserves examination. But it was much more than a mere symbol....

In the year 1848, Charles Gavan Duffy, the Young Irelander, full of anger and mortification could cry out that the famine was nothing less than, 'a fearful murder committed on the mass of the people'. That indictment has come down to us alive and compelling in the writings of John Mitchel. This famine, which saw the destruction of the cottier class and forced some 3,000,000 people to live on charity in the year 1847, was something that went to the very basis of Irish society. It is easy to say, at a distance of a century, that men like Mitchel and Gavan Duffy wrote in an exaggerated way about the famine and that it was quite absurd for P. A. Sillard, the biographer of John Mitchel, to compare a respectable whig administrator, like Lord Clarendon, with the stern Elizabethan Lord Mountjoy, who destroyed the very crops of his enemies. These accusations may be exaggerated, but their influence on Irish thought and the sincerity with which they were made can hardly be doubted.

In the existing commentaries on the famine period, it is possible to detect two trends of thought related but yet distinct. On the one hand, we find that the more actively the writer was interested in political nationalism, the more determined he appeared to place full responsibility on the British government and its agents for what happened in Ireland. So it was with Gavan Duffy and

later with Arthur Griffith, who could say that the British government deliberately used 'the pretext of the failure of the potato crop to reduce the Celtic population by famine and exile'. In contrast to this approach, we find the heirs of Fintan Lalor less willing to see in the Great Famine a conscious conspiracy against the nation. For them the disaster has a more organic, less deliberate origin. It was the social system rather than government which was at fault. James Connolly, in his acute analysis of Irish society, could declare: 'No man who accepts capitalist society and the laws thereof can logically find fault with the statesmen of England for their acts in that awful period'. But whether Connolly's important reservations be accepted or not, the famine, as a social phenomenon, as a testing time for the 19th-century state is entitled to the closest study by the modern historian. The political commentator, the ballad singer and the unknown maker of folk-tales have all spoken about the Great Famine, but is there more to be said?...

The traditional interpretation of the Great Famine is fundamental to an understanding of the character of Irish society in the second half of the 19th century and later. But if modern research cannot substantiate the traditional in all its forms, something surely more sobering emerges which is, perhaps, of greater value towards an appreciation of the problems that beset all mankind, both the governors and the governed in every generation. If man, the prisoner of time, acts in conformity with the conventions of society into which he is born, it is difficult to judge him with an irrevocable harshness. So it is with the men of the famine era. Human limitations and timidity dominate the story of the Great Famine, but of great and deliberately imposed evil in high positions of responsibility there is little evidence. The really great evil lay in the totality of that social order which made such a famine possible and which could tolerate, to the extent it did, the sufferings and hardship caused by the failure of the potato crop.

### 3. Post-revisionist interpretation: Cormac Ó Gráda on Famine historiography

Cormac Ó Gráda, *Ireland Before and after the Famine: Explorations in Economic History, 1800-1925*, 1988

The historiography of the Great Famine is curious. For a catastrophe usually rated the key event in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Irish history, it has produced remarkably little serious academic research in Ireland itself....

What work there is takes some pains to debunk the accounts of the 'political commentator, the ballad singer and unknown maker of folk-tales'. So too, apparently, does the orthodoxy of the third level classroom. Traditionalist appraisals that even hint at culprits and villains from across the Irish Sea tend to get short shrift. From this anti-populist perspective the current orthodoxy is doubly reassuring. On the one hand, far from being another simple case of race murder, the Famine is held to have been exaggerated in the past by 'emotive' nationalist propagandists like John Mitchel and O'Donovan Rossa, in terms of both regional incidence and excess mortality. On the other, what deaths there were tend to be regarded as the largely inevitable or unavoidable consequence of economic backwardness.

Shattering dangerous myths about the past is the historian's social responsibility. In Ireland, where popular history is an odd brew of myth and reality, there is plenty for him to do. Perhaps a dose of cold revisionism was necessary to purge the locals of a simplistic and hysterical...view of the Famine as a 'British plot'? The connection between popular history and nationalist resistance is, after all, real. It was the IRA leader Ernie O'Malley who wrote of the 1916 rising: 'In the evening I was in a whirl; my mind jumped from a snatch of song to a remembered page of economic history.' Correcting nationalist misconceptions about historical grievances has been the unifying theme of revisionist Irish economic history for the last few decades. But when it comes to the Famine have Irish historians not allowed their 'generosity and restraint' to run away with them? On the evidence, there is at least an argument to be put forward. Students of other famines seeking comparative insights may be impressed by the lack of Irish emotion or outrage, but they will quickly note too that themes central to mainstream famine history research have been ignored in Irish work....

A good example of the 'generosity and restraint' view is the famous collection of essays *The Great Famine: Studies in Irish History*, edited in 1956 by the Dublin historians Dudley Edwards and Desmond Williams. Eschewing a narrative approach, the editors emphasized instead the Famine's roots deep in history, pointing to 'the scale of the actual outlay to meet the famine', and in essence making excuses for the attitudes of British bureaucrats and politicians.... As a

scholarly introduction to the Great Famine the Edwards and Williams volume lacks coherence and fairness.

What of the competition? By not attempting a general history Edwards and Williams in effect left it to the 'popular' historian Cecil Woodham-Smith to fill the void a few years later. Woodham-Smith's enduring best-seller has its faults: it errs on several details, its understanding of the economic context is weak, and its interpretation of motives and events is sometimes cavalier. Still, looking back, it certainly deserved better than the chilly and delayed welcome accorded by the late F. S. L. Lyons... [who] derided *The Great Hunger* for its naive populism and lack of humility. It was wrong of Woodham-Smith, he claimed, to criticize government outside its contemporary context; horrific descriptive accounts of the tragedy were all very well, but one must turn elsewhere for 'the reason why'. Students were asked to join in the fun of debunking Woodham-Smith; those taking an honours history degree at University College, Dublin, in 1963 were invited to write an essay on 'The Great Hunger is a great novel'. Orthodoxy has hardly changed since.... Robert Kee's graphic and 'emotive' television history of 1980 met a worse fate than Woodham-Smith: it was heavily criticised by a leading Dublin academic for lending succour to terrorism....

Why have Irish historians shunned famine research? Why are outside historians less hidebound in their assessments? Politics is at least part of the answer; Irish historians are, by and large, a conservative bunch. There are no Irish E. P. Thompsons or Eugene Genoveses. But the considerable rhetorical challenge posed by 'emotive' traditional accounts must also be a deterrent. Attempts at balance always risk being interpreted as making excuses. The Famine remains a sensitive subject, and perhaps that is why its economic and social history has not been written....

The current orthodoxy...tends to view the Great Famine as both unavoidable and inevitable. I see it instead as the tragic outcome of three factors: an ecological accident that could not have been predicted, and ideology ill geared to saving lives and, of course, mass poverty. The role of sheer bad luck is important: Ireland's ability to cope with a potato failure would have been far greater a few decades later, and the political will - and the political pressure - to spend more money to save lives greater too. If this post-revisionist interpretation of events of the 1840s comes closer to the traditional story, it also keeps its distance from the wilder populist interpretations mentioned earlier. Food availability was a problem; nobody wanted the extirpation of the Irish as a race.