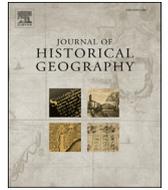




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Review article

Scars on the land: imaging and imagining catastrophe

Apparitions of Death and Disease: The Great Hunger in Ireland, Christine Kinealy. Quinnipiac University Press, Hamden, CT (2015). 40 pages, €11.95 paperback; The Tombs of a Departed Race: Illustrations of Ireland's Great Hunger, Niamh O'Sullivan. Quinnipiac University Press, Hamden, CT (2015). 68 pages, €11.95 paperback; Limits of the Visible: Representing the Great Hunger, Luke Gibbons. Quinnipiac University Press, Hamden, CT (2015). 40 pages, €11.95 paperback; Monuments and Memorials of the Great Famine, Catherine Marshall. Quinnipiac University Press, Hamden, CT (2015). 36 pages, €11.95 paperback.

The sesquicentenary of the Great Famine in the mid-1990s arrived at a time of rising economic prosperity in the Republic of Ireland. In notable contrast to the event's centenary, an impressive number of scholars, writers, musicians, and artists directed their energies to documenting and commemorating the social and economic upheavals that befell the island in the mid nineteenth century, while also tracking and reflecting on their long-term impact. Historical geographers contributed their expertise in a number of highly regarded publications, and, as popular and scholarly books on the famine continue to hit the shelves, the consequences of the worst demographic calamity in nineteenth century Europe remain a point of debate.¹

Books and atlases comprised but two components of these commemorative and interpretive landscapes, of course. Famine walks and famine museums entered the fray as sites for understanding how the catastrophe unfolded and how parallels might be drawn with socioeconomic predicaments in Ireland and elsewhere in the present neoliberal age. The Irish National Famine Museum opened at Strokestown Park in the north midlands in 1994. Across the Atlantic, Quinnipiac University in Connecticut commenced the assembly of materials for what, in 2012, became Ireland's Great Hunger Museum (IGHM), the 'world's largest collection of visual art, artifacts and printed materials relating to the starvation and forced emigration that occurred throughout Ireland from 1845 to 1850'.²

The four essay-length booklets reviewed here introduce the interdisciplinary 'Famine Folios' series, a collaboration between Cork University Press in Ireland and the IGHM. The aim of the series is to provide short and accessible insights into the famine for students, scholars, researchers, and general readers. It is a stimulating example of museum outreach, and at least ten additional volumes are planned on topics such as eviction, music, journalism, folklore, poetry, literature, and language shift.

Although the booklets are unnumbered, the logical starting point is *Apparitions of Death and Disease: The Great Hunger in Ireland*, authored by historian Christine Kinealy, inaugural director of Ireland's Great Hunger Institute at Quinnipiac. Drawing on the last thirty-or-so years of scholarship, Kinealy's overview presents key turning points, illuminating quantitative data, and a useful summary chronology in the appendix. We learn, for instance, that following two successive failures of the potato crop—that of 1846 being almost total—more than three million people (in a population of about 8.5 million in 1845) were receiving rations at soup kitchens across Ireland in July 1847 as humanitarian efforts reached a peak. Yet these were precisely the same months in which the defenders of laissez-faire economics within British governmental circles would, once they declared the worst of the famine over, insist that Irish ratepayers assume the burden of funding future Irish poor relief. Although ostensibly a full partner within a political union with Britain since 1801, Ireland continued to be treated as a separate, virtually a foreign, entity.

The policy response of Lord John Russell's Whig ministry, centred on a dogmatic faith in free trade and infused with a heady dose of providentialist thought, had dire consequences for Irish lives and landscapes when the 1848 potato crop failed completely. The infamous restriction of outdoor relief to those holding no more than a quarter-acre of land forced families to surrender their holdings to landlords anxious to 'improve' the rural economy through pastoral agriculture. The threat and terror of starvation, destitution, and disease haunted rural and urban communities as mortality and emigration levels alike gathered dramatic momentum. Ireland would not be free of potato blight until 1852. Kinealy's overview will, fittingly, leave readers with further questions about the famine, and they may well, like the author herself, question whether Ireland has truly recovered from it.

The three remaining booklets explore the webs of relations connecting the producers of visual famine-related works, the context and purpose of their creations, and the public reception of these images and structures on both sides of the Atlantic from the mid nineteenth century to the present. In *The Tombs of a Departed Race*, IGHM curator Niamh O'Sullivan analyses the images presented in British mass-market periodicals at the height of the famine, concentrating on the *Illustrated London News* and *Pictorial Times*, titles that first appeared in 1842 and 1843 respectively. In *Limits of the Visible*, literary and cultural studies specialist Luke Gibbons extends the analytical scope beyond famine-era images to the art of recent decades, including paintings, sculptures, and installations. Many of the illustrations discussed in these two volumes are accessible through a valuable digital database launched by the IGHM in 2014.³

The relative novelty of illustrated news periodicals presented British readers with evidence of Irish peasant life as it reacted to a mounting crisis. As O'Sullivan notes, however, the pictured 'truth'

¹ See, for example, John Crowley, William J. Smyth, and Mike Murphy (Eds), *Atlas of the Great Irish Famine*, Cork, 2012 and David P. Nally, *Human Encumbrances: Political Violence and the Great Irish Famine*, South Bend, 2011.

² See <http://www.thegreathunger.org/Museum>, accessed 16 November 2015.

³ See <https://repository.quinnipiac.edu/collections/access/home.do>, accessed 16 November 2015.

of events and circumstances in late 1840s Ireland was heavily filtered. Quite aside from the technological and editorial factors involved in image production, illustrators were unaccustomed to depicting the extremities of poverty and disease, and European art conventions yielded few precedents on how the unimaginable—death—could be represented. Correspondents and illustrators visiting distressed Irish localities were thus constrained in their abilities to represent the worst of what they were able or allowed to see. Words were, however, potent supplements to images, and reports of mass grave burials, rats gnawing at bodies, or dogs digging up cadavers undoubtedly made for harrowing reading. The Irish-born James Mahony preferred to depict closed cabin doors and turned backs rather than the explicit horrors of disease-ridden bodies for the *Illustrated London News*. Audiences encountered the ‘deserving poor’ of destitute widows, mothers, and children, in addition to the drama of evictions and emigration. Ships’ dormitories made for more palatable viewing than the fever-dens that overcrowded workhouse interiors had become. And the British public did not have to contend with depictions of potatoes blackened by disease or the continued exportation of grain.

Illustrations mobilized public opinion and relief committees were established to alleviate distress. As Gibbons contends, however, the images never spoke purely for themselves, and viewers were left to imagine the full depth of an evolving disaster. While such imaginations could invite sympathy, other, more hardened, perceptions became activated as the crisis persisted and interpretations of Ireland’s latest problem took shape. In the process, the ‘othering’ of Irish bodies and landscapes was intensified. Although laissez-faire had its public detractors, Irish cabins, huts, and ‘scraps’ confirmed to the most influential British observers the lack of industry in an indolent Catholic peasantry and the poverty that stemmed from overdependence on the potato. Places such as Skibbereen in West Cork acquired notoriety, while the ragged figure of Bridget O’Donnell represented the antithesis of Victorian femininity. Reactions were also coloured by the sight of the newest wave of Irish migrants entering British cities and the threats of violence captured in images of the Young Ireland revolt, food riots, and pike-making. For O’Sullivan, these illustrations are best seen in combination as part of an evolving narrative, and emerge in her view as ‘an indictment of those who oversaw the catastrophe’ (p. 22). Yet there was little to no critique in these same periodicals of the Whigs’ adherence to a policy of free trade and fiscal stringency that ultimately took priority over the preservation of Irish lives.

Gibbons explores the threads connecting images, emotions, ideology, and policy. He argues that while the severity of famine images, past and present, may inspire radical responses from spectators that demand the responsible reformation of political systems that perpetuate injustice, emotions that coalesce around pity and charity do little to question such structures and, at worst, absolve the state of wrongdoing. His discussion is informed by insights from Edmund Burke, Susan Sontag, and Hannah Arendt, and resonates especially at a time when stark images of drowned migrants on Aegean and Mediterranean coastlines have become commonplace and the response of the European Union and its member states is up for discussion.

Gibbons thus links the *aesthetics* of images to the *ethics* of both artists and spectators. The unflinching eyes of famine-scarred figures in particular compelled responses from those viewers into whose eyes they stared. The emaciated figure in ragged clothing demands justice—will the viewer oblige? How? Or will he or she avert their gaze? This idea is best exemplified in *Gorta* (*Hunger*), Lillian Lucy Davidson’s 1946 painting of a burial scene whose central figure communicates anger, despair, and defiance as he commences the digging of a grave for his dead baby. This vivid image is included

in three of the four volumes reviewed here. Davidson’s work also points to certain scale-based dilemmas located within the image-emotion nexus, namely, how far can the spectator’s response extend beyond the ‘human interest’ level of individual/family? Population-level statistics do not typically stir hearts, though the Victorian penchant for economic calculation is powerfully critiqued in Rowan Gillespie’s *Statistic I* and *Statistic II* (2010), featuring bronze sculptures of famine figures atop two tables into which are carved the names of some 650 people who died in quarantine and were buried in a mass grave in Staten Island.

Issues of representation and emotion are also addressed in *Monuments and Memorials of the Great Famine* by art historian Catherine Marshall. Monuments, she remarks, are typically experienced in outdoor settings and have largely tended to communicate the heroics of men. How, then, to express the trauma associated with an event that took one million lives and triggered long-term population decline in Ireland? Although new structures in the landscape cannot adequately compensate for historical loss, choices are nonetheless made about their location and the sorts of emotional responses and cultural-political readings their design may encourage. Beyond stone and bronze, however, Marshall notes that famine memory was communicated in fiction, plays, and poetry in both Irish and English at various stages of the twentieth century. Unofficial crosses also became placed in different parts of the Irish landscape over time and some derelict workhouses and ‘famine roads’ currently form the basis of famine walks. One hopes that a later volume in this series will address this theme of ruins and famine memory in more detail.

Marshall discusses well-known sculptural works of famine commemoration by John Behan (*The National Famine Memorial* (1997) or ‘famine ship’ on the western coast of Co. Mayo, and *The Arrival—The New Dawn* (2000) at the United Nations Plaza in Manhattan) and Brian Tolle, whose *Irish Hunger Memorial* (2002) at Battery Park City at the southern edge of Manhattan places Ireland’s tragedy alongside current dilemmas of hunger and malnutrition worldwide. Located some blocks from the key nerve-centre of global capitalism, Wall Street, Tolle’s memorial invites contemplation of the present nature of consumption. The Irish were denied justice in the mid-nineteenth century, but what can those presently caught in the grip of food insecurity expect now? Current observers of the memorial will do well to remember that while malnutrition continues to plague many regions of the Global South, the economic and emotional burdens of poverty have anything but disappeared in post-Celtic Tiger Ireland.

One should not expect critical indictments of capitalism to emerge so easily from the viewing of such memorials, however. Marshall is uneasy, for example, about ‘a new corporate ownership of the past’ in which donors’ names appear on plaques (p. 22). Elsewhere, heroic narratives endure through Irish American origin stories that foreground victims-cum-survivors who made good in a ‘land of opportunity’ where the logics of markets and property that spurred their emigration reappear in earnest. This is the case with Behan’s *The Arrival* and similar structures in Boston and Philadelphia. Tensions may, therefore, exist between representations of the grotesque realities of 1840s Ireland and later triumphs in which the affective power of the latter displaces that of the former. In contrast, the lists of names of immigrants and orphan girls at memorials in Toronto and Sydney respectively invite simple and solemn reflection. Ultimately, for Marshall, the challenge is to commemorate Ireland’s famine in a way that, echoing Gibbons, emphasizes a politics of liberation and empowerment rather than one of simple pity. Here, historical lessons are learned, an amnesty is declared on past pain, and future challenges are faced with strength and conviction.

These opening four volumes in the 'Famine Folios' series are, on the whole, sharply written and beautifully illustrated. They promise to serve not only as valuable scholarly contributions but also a novel way for general readers to access leading research before tackling the burgeoning collection of famine monographs. They deserve a wide readership in homes and classrooms alike, within and beyond Ireland, and will hopefully inspire debates about present-day concerns as well as visits to the IGHM to observe at first hand its formidable array of materials.

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American Geography and Geographers: Toward Geographical Science, Geoffrey J. Martin. Oxford University Press, New York (2015). 1210 pages, US\$195 hardcover.

Geoffrey Martin's book has the stated intention of providing a history of geographic knowledge in the United States from the post-bellum era to the early 1960s (i.e., shortly after the publication of Richard Hartshorne's 1959 *Perspective on the Nature of Geography*). It is not a quick read: 1210 pages and a shipping weight of 3.7lbs. Martin, the official archivist of the American Association of Geographers (AAG), is perhaps best known to a previous generation of students for *All Possible Worlds: A History of Geographical Ideas*, with Preston E. James, which went through four editions between 1972 and 2005. The current work represents seventeen years of research and writing. The book is clearly intended to promote Martin's view of American geography—driven by particular men (overwhelmingly) rather than concepts or problems—and to underline the value of classical regional geography. It is also curiously sanitized; geography's dalliances with eugenics and promulgation of colonialism and empire-making are absent.

The book expands and supplements Martin's earlier books on what, for him, are key figures in American geography, namely Isaiah Bowman, Ellsworth Huntington, and Mark Jefferson. Additionally, as is described in the book, Martin had a long personal association with Richard Hartshorne, meeting with him regularly for more than 20 years. Martin wrote the *Annals* obituaries for Hartshorne and James, as well as editing and contributing to the invaluable *Geographers: Biobibliographical Studies* series.

Despite the book's inclusive title, the bulk of the text focuses on the first half of the twentieth century. Its core chapters take us from the beginning of the twentieth century through to the immediate aftermath of the Second World War. After describing how European and especially German approaches to geography (e.g., those of Alexander von Humboldt, Albrecht Penck, and Friedrich Ratzel) were introduced to the United States by the likes of Ellen Churchill Semple (the myth of her sitting outside the Ratzel's lecture theater door, barred from entry by her sex, is rejected on p. 411) the book discusses the formation of early disciplinary foci. Among these foci were regions, economic geography (especially at Chicago), environmentalism, and, after the Second World War, political geography. Three chapters are given over to geographers and war, including Bowman's 'Inquiry' during the First World War and the Office of Strategic Services during the Second. We learn how American geography, through the 'Inquiry', was

instrumental in advising the outcome of the Paris Peace Conference. Martin's level of detail here is astonishing, but often sourced so vaguely (e.g., the 'National Archives') as to be frustrating.

The major figure of these early years is William Morris Davis, the Harvard geologist-geographer. Davis receives extensive treatment from Martin; firstly, for bringing in 'German style' geography to the United States, and, secondly, for his institutional influence in co-founding the AAG and being teacher of Jefferson, Bowman, Douglas Johnson, J. K. Wright, Lawrence Martin, and many other noteworthy geographers. Having covered this founding moment, Martin devotes much of the rest of his book to a close-up detailing of the great men, as he sees it, who brought the discipline of geography into being. Carl Sauer, Derwent Whittlesey, Armin Lobeck (a skilled draftsman and cartographer), Albert Brigham, and others make their appearance, but after Bowman it is Richard Hartshorne who is lauded as '[o]ne of the keenest political geographers' (p. 1172). Controversially perhaps in an age sensitive to cultural appropriation, Martin laments that the drift from regional geography in the 1950s mean that 'when the United States was involved in a war in Vietnam, there was a lack of geographic specialists for that part of the world' (p. 1124). The description of the United States as having been 'involved in' a war is not an atypical passive construction; the book makes no attempt at understanding geography's deliberate military turns.

Martin is an archive-driven scholar; not only has he visited a very large number of them (the book claims 152 in fourteen countries) but he also founded, moved, rescued, preserved, and maintained them both officially and at his private residence. Martin was instrumental in forming the American Geographical Society (AGS) archives, now housed at Wisconsin-Milwaukee. For example, although there was a fifty-year moratorium on accessing former AGS Director Isaiah Bowman's papers, in the early 1960s Martin obtained special permission to visit the then-privately held papers by Bowman's son, taking extensive verbatim quotations that he used in his Jefferson and Bowman books. Martin has publicly stated that some of Bowman's papers were later destroyed by Bowman's son before the archive was transferred to Johns Hopkins University, and therefore Martin's records are now the only copies. (This fact became a point of contention when Neil Smith's book on Bowman appeared, which sourced some quotes to the private archive, but which apparently came unacknowledged from Martin's books.)

Martin's own correspondence, occasionally cited in the book, started in 1959 with Carl Sauer, Charles Colby, Griffith Taylor, and former students of Bowman. Yet it is Bowman, who was Director of the AGS from 1915 until 1935 (when he became President of Johns Hopkins University), who remains, for Martin, the exemplar geographer; directly advising two wartime presidents (Wilson and Roosevelt), organizing foreign field excursions, especially to his favorite countries in Latin America, and masterminding the 1:1 million Hispanic American map or 'Millionth Map'. It is true that Bowman was at the center of significant events, but Martin's positive, indeed almost worshipful attitude, towards him reads oddly today. Here it is interesting to compare the superabundance of Bowman in Martin's book to another history of geography which came out around the same time: the seventh edition of *Geography and Geographers: Anglo-American Human Geography Since 1945* (2016) by Ron Johnston and James Sidaway. This latter book, although covering much of the same time period, barely touches on Davis, Bowman, and Huntington, and omits Jefferson entirely. The 'Millionth Map', which Martin credits (not unreasonably) as 'one of the largest contributions in the history of twentieth century American geography' (p. 701) is little known today, having been considered already out of date by the time it was published and standing now as a monument to Bowman's expansionist hubris.