A Holocaust of Humanity

BY DAVID DOOLIN

PART I

THE *Famine Folio Series* is an insightful collection of short paperbacks that introduce the reader to the record, the tragedy and some of the lingering outcomes of the Great Famine in Ireland (1845-1852). At the outset the format and presentation of these concise volumes provides an excellent and pointed accessibility to what is the central matter for understanding modern Irish history. The use of primary materials from paintings, newspaper reports and poetry, to the measurements, statistics and official accounts are interwoven with the excellent, succinct and insightful writings of their respective scholarly authors. For instance, L. Perry Curtis" investigation into the undoubtedly dissolute practice of utilizing the tragedy of Famine to evict impoverished Irish farmers and their families, helps provide an efficiently, irrevocable witness to the specific and crucial policies of the era. At the outset, the reader is brought into the story of Ireland's cruelest tragedy through the contemporaneous images from the *Illustrated London News* (*ILN*), bolstered by eyewitness accounts of various devastations following Famine and eviction in the west of Ireland, augmented further by a few of the startling statistics of removal and depopulation during the Famine. As it was recognized at the time, the expulsion of so many people from the land during Ireland's Great Hunger was performed in "the guise of charity and benevolence." Curtis begins to recover the reality of eviction by providing the basic facts about that experience, offering a more holistic context to understand what led to removal, the laws that enabled it, as well as speaking to the recollection of expulsion, to help shed light on the larger consequences of this past for Ireland.

Curtis's clear and unapologetic delivery of the facts and figures regarding the history of dislodgment during the Irish Famine offers a restitution of eviction's central place in the story of starvation, emigration and exile. With over a million dead by 1852 and over two and a half million people erased from the Irish countryside in the space of the decade 1841-1851, this study reminds the student of the Famine that without engaging the central function of eviction in the death and dislocation, then this particular "holocaust of humanity" can only be vaguely understood. Imperatively, we are reminded here that the landed elite of Britain and Ireland, regardless of faith, nationality or ethnic origin, rejected the humanity of "the pauper victims of Famine and disease" and embraced the opportunity to clear the land of the (and the emphasis is important to the argument) *Irish* poor, justified by Protestant religious superiority and laissez-faire economic imperatives. Furthermore, the longer term scars of this history can be traced in Curtis's explanations of the impact on ordinary people of this long held policy of eviction and its threat that hung over people's heads. For example, when he writes how the Irish peasantry "thrived on close ties of kinship and depended on daily social interaction to enrich their otherwise austere lives. The Great Hunger wiped out this communal way of life and scattered the survivors far and wide." That's to say, the violence of cultural and communal destruction due to expulsion is as imperative to the Famine story as the death and disease that abounded in the era.

BOOKS REVIEWED IN THIS ESSAY, INCLUDE:
- *Notice to Quit: The Great Irish Famine Evictions* by L. Perry Curtis.
- *Death in Every Paragraph: Journalism and the Great Irish Famine* by Michael Foley.
- *I mBéal an Bháis: The Great Famine and the Language Shift in Nineteenth-Century Ireland* by Gearóid Ó Tuathaigh.
- *Black Roads: The Famine in Irish Literature* by Robert Smart.

Famine Folio Series, Quinnipiac University Press, 2015. €11.95 each.

In offering further context as to why eviction is so central, Curtis distills the process into three central factors; namely, ideology, prejudice (religious and racial), and socio-economics. In the first instance, *laissez-faire* beliefs among the plutocrats and capitalist lobby were central in helping to create the wealth gap that concentrated so much wealth in so little hands, and so much poverty among so many people within Ireland. To be critical, Perry might have explained further here. A more in depth account of the function of *laissez-faire* within the economic structures that helped devastate Ireland might be required in order to convince the reader of the wrong-headedness of such an ideology when it came to Britain's control over Ireland. Alas, the reader is perhaps too quickly moved on to the function of prejudice and the overlapping of economic and religious imperatives that informed a clearly inimical attitude towards the dying Irish peasantry. The author extrapolates upon what might be his most well-known, book-length study, *Apes and Angels: The Irishman in Victorian Caricature*, that explores how British imperial attitudes "hardened into a form of racial prejudice, supported by new pseudosciences that embraced a hierarchical view of the races of man." The origins of such prejudice are briefly but suitably supported by reference to primary sources that underscore the racist attitudes of the British towards those defined as "other" to the Anglo-Saxon; and none more so than the Irish victims of Famine. More often than not the popular images of the Irish as violent and backward people, produced and consumed extensively by both a British and later a Nativist American audience, depicted "Paddy as a half-simian peasant with sloping forehead, snub nose, and prognathous or projecting lower jaw akin to the facial features of an ape." The result, according to Curtis, of this racial construction helped exacerbate the tragedy of the Great Hunger by offering a psychic shield for those in power to justify a policy of removal, of cutting relief, and even celebration at the death of Ireland's poor at the very height of the Famine. It is hard to refute the argument, although some further details regarding relief efforts may serve the author and the reader well, so as to get a more balanced understanding, without undermining the central contention.

A view of the basic details and the impact of the Poor Law in Ireland further underscores the desperate conditions that evictions compounded, and the desperate conditions in and of themselves during the Great Hunger. While skirting the historiographic controversy, as to what extent this policy lead to forced migration on the one hand, versus the contention that removal was a benevolent effort that coexisted with voluntary migration on the other, Curtis makes the important point that such scholarly debates are moot. The inadequacy of the entire British response to the starving millions, such as the Work House policy or Outdoor Relief schemes, are undeniable and quite simply emigration during the Famine period was not so much a question of whether it should be recalled as voluntary or forced; rather, the reality was the choice that faced ordinary, starving people at the height of the Irish Famine was between starvation, disease and certain death, or emigration. And the fact of eviction and its threat in everyday life during the crisis, was a central factor that influenced the outcome of population decimation in Ireland at this time.

The inhumanity of the eviction process emerges throughout this study in the details of the experience best illustrated through the paintings chosen and the quotations of the disdainful British political lords and the Irish landed gentry who cared little for the people and only focused on the function of the law. Simply put, eviction as espoused here by Curtis" choice of evocation, was seen and indeed explained by those involved on all sides, as an opportunity to clear estates of peasants and consolidate farmlands in order to ensure profits. It was not that these actions went without censure, as Curtis briefly explores the outrage among some liberals, and the sagacity of other politicians who realized it was because of this callousness that hatred of the British metastasized in Ireland. The crudity and cruelty of the evictions in Ireland during the Famine do not need any embellishment, as the mere record of the practice and the plight of those cast out at the moment of expulsion speaks for itself. But more to the point, throughout the Famine era, regardless of the violence and/or condemnation therein, eviction by landlords continued unabated in Ireland. Importantly, the role of the Irish men who partook in the razing of former tenant homes is highlighted and arguably needs much more exploration. That men from distant towns were paid to tear down evicted peasant homes so that those peasants would not be able to return is a part of the Irish story that sorely needs analysis. At least in this volume the fact of that action complicates the eviction story, (thus Irish nationalism), and engenders some important questions to, one hopes, be pursued and expounded in the future.

Interestingly, Curtis concludes his exploration of the eviction by hypothesizing as to the reason for the existence of so few images of Famine era evictions. The few that did appear did not always explore the tragedy in all of its crudity and brutality, with half-clad and starved Irish peasants reduced to a nonresistant mass of dehumanized skin and bones. His argument suggests that no paying audience would want to be confronted with such images, especially at the hands of Irish artists. What's more, by and large, whenever Famine evictions appeared in the newspapers on the British "mainland," it was editorialized as a justified and necessary evil; indeed, this purging was described as "not merely a legal but a natural process." To reemphasize the horror of that practice in the context of starvation, the reader is reminded in the end that "between 1845 and 1854, close to half a million men, women, and children suffered eviction." Regardless of the numbers that were removed forcibly and the petty squabbles among certain scholars therein, the fact that hundreds of thousands of people, families and communities, were destroyed due to the practice of eviction at the height of Famine calls for a more forensic look at the nature and roots of such a policy. While Curtis rejects the case for a conspiracy that led to so much death in Ireland, he does not retreat from delivering in candor the origins of such policies that allowed the Irish peasant class to be so heartlessly treated by the ruling classes in Britain, aided and abetted by their Irish exponents.

ALTHOUGH IN his introduction Michael Foley suggests Ireland, or at least rural Ireland, on the eve of the Famine was somewhat pre-modern, an eighteenth-century relic of sorts, he contradicts the point by acknowledging that Ireland was undergoing several shifts in "public and intellectual life from about 1760 onwards which reflect the European pattern, in particular a major cultural transformation taking place between traditional Gaelic and the urban, educated English-speaking classes." Journalism as a profession and the rise of the popular press were among the kinds of aforementioned public and intellectual changes. Nonetheless, the newspaper industry in Ireland prior to the 1840s was sporadic at best, with several new publications appearing but ultimately failing. And yet, the popular media that was there, remained an important part of Irish life, even among the illiterate (or at least those who didn't read in English) and/or most impoverished, as "the practice of reading newspapers aloud meant the peasantry were able to keep abreast of important stories." Ultimately, as with all aspects of Irish life, the Famine would change the nature of the newspaper industry but perhaps, as Foley elucidates, in unexpected ways. As the rural population decreased the Irish press actually expanded, and the growth of the nationalist newspapers printed in English (rather than Gaelic) began to gain a foothold. With this in mind, the central questions explored by Foley, ask not only how the press reported the Great Hunger, but how the Famine changed the print media business in Ireland, if not globally, as well.

Foley's opening paragraphs expertly coax the reader in, with an impactful facsimile of an original report from December 1849 that brought us the now iconic figure of "Bridget O'Donnell and Children" in *The Illustrated London News (ILN)*. Not only are the broadsheets beautifully regenerated for us, but Foley explains how this appearance in *ILN* signaled a breaking point in journalism. If we think how the Irish poor were most often featured as an anonymous, undifferentiated mass of ne'er-do-wells, here we not only have a named victim but her family's story in their own words. The interview, then, as a journalistic device appears some-thirty years prior to when it supposedly became a common newspaper feature. The point and importance of this interview in the context of the Great Famine, Foley cogently explains, was that the incredulity that met the reports of suffering, coupled with compassion fatigue were being challenged by this new journalistic approach. That is, the Brigid O'Donnell interview is an example of how an Irish journalist was utilizing the words of a person directly experiencing the tragedy, in order to make an emotional connection for/with the reader. Furthermore, for the journalist and thus print media, the efforts are about authentication and claims to factuality. Reporting on the Famine in this first instance, therefore, suggests something prototypical with the appearance of interview, while also implying a change in the methodologies sought by the business to legitimize their stories as "fact."

Foley continues by suggesting some broader context regarding the nature of journalism and emerging ideologies of the era. One important development in the nineteenth century to consider, he argues, is the philosophical change towards humanitarianism or empathy within the wider world, despite the Malthusian beliefs that held sway within the halls of British power. With more international interaction alongside the enlightenment evident in the 1840s French Revolution and the Rights of Man, including a free press, British Malthusian ideas did not hold sway over the entire population. Within these contexts, journalists began to wrestle for control over what was reported and how. That is, the move towards more human interest stories and social issues extrapolated through the words of the individual, grappled with the traditional journalism that merely reported the redacted words of authority figures; the humdrum accounts of courts, parliaments and respected-men from societies most privileged set. Ultimately, the power of the Famine shifted journalists' approach to reporting because of the scale of the horror they were witnessing, and the hopelessness of conventional reporting to express what was observed. Meanwhile, on the mainland of Britain, the rise of the working classes and their demand for a free press, led to the government implementing high taxes and other restrictive practices on newspapers, in order to control the population. Elite hegemony was safeguarded and (literally) broadcast by retaining who and what was being published. But changes were implemented in the 1840s to address the public concern over freer reporting, and the emergence of the illustrated newspaper in particular sowed the seeds for transformation, at least in Britain proper. In Ireland, the British authorities were more apt to harassment, closure, and violence against non-conformist newspaper, "while journalists and editors were imprisoned and deported throughout the nineteenth century." Nonetheless, changes in technology allowed images and text to be printed side by side, and the emergence of journalism as a professional trade encouraged Irish writers to form assemblies and associations, continually challenging the oppressive controls implemented by the British government. Foley reminds us that all of this is important in the context of reporting the Famine, as writers fought for access to official/officials" records and governmental meetings where mismanagement and heartless policy decisions, exposed the cruelty of the rich and powerful in their dealings with, and attitudes towards, the hungry and destitute. To use a present day phrase then, one might be able to suggest how the changing nature of journalism helped "speak truth to power" if not during, then certainly after the Great Hunger in Ireland.

Additionally, Foley teaches the history reader that one must take account of the media context and newspaper history, in order to better assess the nature of the reporting and its significance to the past. Tersely put, there is potentially huge work that needs to be done when it comes to Irish Famine history and the history of the newspaper in Ireland, Britain, and indeed internationally. In order to present an approach that might inform such a study, Foley aptly uses the penultimate subheading of his study to provide a case study of news reports and the Famine, in County Cork. It is the coverage of incidents in West Cork in response to the Irish Famine, for instance, which can be explored to show a new beginning within journalism that came to define how reporters around the world cover disasters. Foley explains how the Irish Famine influenced "news values" such as the humanitarian angle, the interview, the personal story, the powerful and the powerless, and indeed even "pack journalism, with a number of journalist being drawn to the same story."

Foley's exploration of three newspapers from Cork during 1847 (Black '47), help shed a novel light on the Famine in Ireland, when the history of each paper is considered alongside the actual reports being printed. In all three, the reports of starvation are common, but the level of details differ, depending on a particular newspaper's ideology and political leanings. But most strikingly, it was the "new" journalistic method of reporting on coroner's inquests, (arguably an objective witness) for instance, which enable the paper-writer to portray through graphic imagery the tragedy and inhumanity of death by starvation with a degree of candor and "authenticity." This was a style that became imbedded in the way human stories would be told in the future via newspapers. However, in the Irish context, to counter these horrific accounts which undoubtedly emboldened Irish nationalism and embarrassed the British authorities, conservative Cork newspapers emphasized philanthropy, rather than coroner testimonies. This reportage notwithstanding, Foley continues to explain that while the "writing about the hunger and deprivation was most graphic" within these journals, nonetheless the Famine did *not* dominate the news. The papers in Cork had a thoroughly commercial and middle class audience, thus the financial news governed alongside horse racing, fashion, shipping news, and army promotions. A surprising amount of international news, especially from across the Empire, was prevalent alongside the usual accounts of the politics of the day in terms of elections and O'Connell's Repeal Movement, for instance.

Thus, the point being made it seems, is that the way in which the shocking stories of Famine death from these kinds of newspapers that are often presented as isolated from the larger context of the history of the newspaper in and of itself, might become somewhat misleading when one considers the realities of the era. A fuller exploration of the background informing the newspaper, as well as the various stories within, from cover to cover, may help to give a broader and more considered view of reactions to the Famine in Ireland in 1847. Furthermore, as Foley explains, "there is little doubt that the extent of the coverage and the presence of a newspaper had an influence on the degree of relief, philanthropy, and charity an area might receive." To extrapolate, the function of the newspaper in the midst of the tragedy of Famine was to help create an idea of a "civil society," wherein fellow human beings might empathize and be stirred to civil action when it came to the reporting on display. By covering meetings to discuss the best policy, recipes for alleviating hunger, eye-witness statements and interviews, as well as reports of coroner's inquests related to the Famine, all the newspapers testified about the Great Hunger. But they also reported on everyday life more generally in 1847, regarding the various experiences of various people, during the time of the Great Hunger. Thus, although it may be tempting when writing about the Famine to sift contemporaneous media accounts and highlight reports like the bountiful coroner reports, it is important to acknowledge that the newspapers of the era were not just receptacles of Famine horror stories. There is a broader context that needs to be explored, starting with the details of the newspaper and its history on its own merits.

Foley concludes that while the Irish press did not itself develop technologically at, or to, the same levels as the British media industry (like in all industries, colonial conditions left Ireland lagging behind the imperial center), nonetheless the Famine did offer "a training ground for a generation of journalists in the use of the human-interest story and the development of news values." The Irish press as an industry had to play catch up, but as for the Irish journalists, they produced stories during the Famine that became disseminated internationally and served them well going forward. Thus the Famine helped shape the direction of the media in Ireland and when economic growth arrived in the aftermath of the tragedy, despite Ireland's declining population, "the press developed and grew" and reporters knew where to go in order to cover, in detail, any story. Finally and importantly, as Foley reminds us, many of these journalists were so close to the death and despair, they channeled "their shock and outrage into a nascent nationalist press that was beginning to emerge in the 1840s." The politically motivated journalists of Ireland were, then, shaped by their work during the Great Hunger and came to be some of the most influential actors on the Irish stage in the post-Famine era.

End of Part I. Part II will be published in the Fall 2017 issue.

To Vietnam and Back

By Seán Farrell Moran

The memoirs of soldiers are arguably at the very heart of western civilization. Even if Homer had never been at Troy, the language of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* suggests that its author had indeed been to war, as Homer knew the whole arch of the soldier's experience, from the trauma of combat to the perilous psychological journey home from war. That experience was known by heart by every educated Greek and is buried deep within the foundation of our culture. From Homer onward the literature of the warrior has played a major role in our understanding of heroism, sacrifice, duty, honor, pain, and since for most of our history, the soldier's role was exclusive to men, it defined our thinking about masculinity and manly virtue.

Edward Hagan
To Vietnam in Vain:
Memoir of an Irish-American Intelligence Advisor, 1969-1970
Jefferson, NC; McFarland and Company, 2016. $19.95

The past century, the most violent in human history, has yielded a wealth of great books by those who have been in combat. As Paul Fussell made us aware, the Great War saw a literal deluge of war memoirs in the interwar period and the genre was thus entrenched as a literary feature of the modern era. But not all war memoirs of our time are the same and they tend to fall into a number of categories. The generals have frequently had stories to tell but few of those tell us very much about what it is like to go to war; almost all of them are political documents and apologies of one kind or another. They tell us little of what it meant to fight in a war. More useful have been those by smaller unit commanders. Some of these, such as Charles MacDonald's *Company Commander* (1947), are classics that deal with the problems of command at the level where combat is fought. Then there are books that immerse us in the trauma of combat such as Ernst Jünger's *Storm of Steel* (1920), notably unapologetic about the violence of war, or E. B. Sledge's *With the Old Breed* (1981), where the horror of that violence is fully revealed. Some of the greatest memoirs attempt to see war in a larger personal and social context such as Robert Graves's *Goodbye to All That* (1929) and Fussell's *Wartime* (1990).

The Vietnam War has produced classics of its own, from war reporter Michael Herr's *Dispatches* to Phillip Caputo's *A Rumor of War*, both published in 1977, but what might distinguish the soldier's literature on that war from previous wars is the tension between the combat experience and the endless doubts that the enterprise had any value at all. Memoirs of the two World Wars grapple with the supposed purposes of these wars, but for the most part their writers stoically accept the warrior's terrible