

Irish hunger artist

Works by Macdonald highlight a dark time

BY TRACEY O'SHAUGHNESSY | REPUBLICAN-AMERICAN

Perhaps the most astonishing fact about Daniel Macdonald's devastating painting of Ireland's Great Hunger is that it was exhibited at all.

In Britain.

And in 1847, the beginning of what remains the world's largest famine, a catastrophe that would claim 1 million Irish lives, force another 2 million to emigrate. At the time of the famine, Ireland's population was 8 million. It never recouped that loss; today the population remains at 4.5 million.



Daniel Macdonald's 'An Irish Peasant Family Discovering the Blight,' now on display at Ireland's Great Hunger Museum at Quinnipiac University in Hamden. Credit: ;National Folklore Collection, University College Dublin

The painting — the only known painting of the Irish famine — has crossed the Atlantic for the first time, and is the centerpiece of "In the Lion's Den: Daniel Macdonald, Ireland and Empire," an exciting and complex exhibit now at Ireland's Great Hunger Museum at Quinnipiac University in Hamden. The first exhibit to examine this relatively unknown and gifted Irish artist, it is the most comprehensive ever mounted. The exhibit demonstrates not merely the horror of the famine, but also the intricacy of the social relationships inside Ireland, the rich, folkloric tradition of the country and the audacity, virtuosity and wit of Macdonald himself.

It is almost too facile to wonder why only a single painting exists to represent one of the 19th century's greatest horrors.

Any ambitious Irish painter had to relocate to London, for an education, first, and then to have a moneyed market. Once there, their very Irish identity was something of a source of shame; Macdonald prospered almost immediately on his arrival in London not just because he was preternaturally gifted but because he was also a Protestant and the likely possessor of a peerage. He had cachet.

But he also had a conscience. And he had come from a family steeped in researching the folkloric life of Ireland. That's what gives his works — more than 20 of which are on display — such vigor, empathy and wit. This is an artist in full possession of new, radical skills, using them to portray contemporary subjects with the gravitas typically reserved for history paintings.

At the time of Gainsborough, Reynolds and Turner, Daniel Macdonald (1820-1853) was painting like Corot or Millet, with a touch of impressionistic brush strokes thrown in to add to his edginess.

That boldness would be enough to enshrine Macdonald as one of Ireland's most influential artists. But what makes the artist intriguing is his choice of subject matter — the concentration on the Irish people, largely poor and Catholic, whom he knew well but from whom, as an intellectual, Protestant and aristocrat, was at a slight remove.

So here is an Anglo-Irish painter portraying the Irish with all their wily, superstitious character in a way that, far from indicting them, extols them as preservers of a dynamic culture. And when he sets his sites on the most horrifying chapter on their history, he does so in a way that is human, sympathetic and candid, without being condemnatory — a tough trick, given the British Empire's complicity in the trauma.

Macdonald represents people who suffer from impoverishment and penury and who will likely die because of a poison that has turned their chief crop to odoriferous mush. He does so without the churlish rancor of so many British illustrators, or the confectionary sentimentality of earlier Irish artists.

The family Macdonald paints in "An Irish Peasant Family Discovering the Blight" — the overwhelmed wife, the despairing daughter, the ghoulish grandparents and the wailing infants convulsing at the edges of the work — is one with integrity and individuality. At the center of the work looms the spoiled crop, a spadelike implement that presages the coming horror.

Such a family has one of three fates, says Niamh O'Sullivan, the museum's curator. "Either you died on the side of the road in a ditch, or you went to the workhouse and it was a long, slow, lingering death, or you emigrated. Once you went into the workhouse, you did not come out. You came out in a box at the back door."

The scope of that devastation is fully explored in the museum's chilling permanent exhibit.

It's unclear what the reaction to the painting was when it was exhibited at the prestigious British Institute in London. Likely silence, O'Sullivan suggests. Classically trained artists were unfamiliar and unskilled at painting scenes of contemporary horror. That's one of the reasons behind the dearth of such representations. But there were more.

"Some reports of the famine were too horrific to illustrate," she writes. "Accounts of rats gnawing at the bodies of people still alive, but too weak to fend them off, and dogs feeding at shallow graves, could never make it into art, but there was an abhorrence to conveying the famine in any way. His painting challenged not only polite society but also the most basic aesthetic conventions of the time."

Part of that was taking an unvarnished, even celebratory look at Irish traditions often considered barbarian. The exhibit's highly charged first image, "The Fighter," depicts one of rural Ireland's most vicious traditions — a brutal clash of baton-wielding men meant to avenge everything from family slights to romantic triangles, to the legitimacy of kinship. One legendary fair in 1807 left 20 men dead.

Rural villagers would fight, nearly to the death during these "fairies," in which well-trained participants wielded sticks with agility, fitness and finesse. Captains of the teams — like the strapping, ruddy-faced man at the center of Macdonald's painting — lorded enormous respect and fear among the peasantry. The sash at his waist, coupled with an open shirt revealing his broad, brawny chest, gave a sartorial panache to these men, who were essentially gang leaders.

But in "The Fighter," Macdonald lends his figure a sense of grandeur and even grace, as the marauding hordes assemble on the hills beneath him and a comely lady embraces her lover in the far left of the image. All manner of vile insults were hurled at the opposing side until the captain pivoted to begin the battle.

The heroic posture, said O'Sullivan, "is a demonstration of virility in the Irish male pre-famine and a very bold thing to do."

Still, why paint such a primitive, ostensibly unflattering portrayal of an Irish custom? Likely for the same reason Macdonald painted the adjacent "Sidhe Gaoithe/The Fairy Blast." In this case, we have Irish peasants — and their startled landlords — running from a malevolent fairy that was believed to rush away with little children and replace them with changelings.

Superstitious? Yes, but authentic, and that's what Macdonald was documenting.

He came by that ethnographic interest through his father. James McDaniel was

one of the great polymaths of 19th-century Cork, "an erudite painter, caricaturist, inventor, folklorist and musician," writes O'Sullivan. James McDaniel, along with Crofton Croker, became leading figures in the gathering and documentation of the life and customs of rural Ireland. It was Croker in particular, and by extension, Macdonald, who saw these brutal rituals as representations of a greater goal — national self-determination — as well as drilling for an eventual confrontation.

As he saw it, "The witty servility of the Irish peasantry, mingled with occasional burst of desperation and revenge — the devoted yet visionary patriotism, the romantic sense of honor and improvident yet unalterable attachments — are evidences of a conquest without system, an irregular government and the remains of a feudal clanship, the barbarous and arbitrary organization of a warlike people."

O'Sullivan believes this type of investigation into the peasantry had a political motive, promoting the civilizing force English society had had on the savage, unruly Irish citizenry. "Irish barbarism tamed and preserved by English civility," she writes.

But Macdonald was able to see the integrity of such rituals, and, by painting them, enshrines them as rites of value.

"He was a true radical," said O'Sullivan. "He was interested in breaking through so many boundaries — the boundaries of subject and the boundaries of treatment of subject."

Outside of the seminal image of the famine, most of Macdonald's Irish paintings were not exhibited in British venues. They are seen here together for the first time, nearly 200 years after Macdonald's death, at age 32, in 1853.

Email tosh@rep-am.com.

What: "In the Lion's Den: Daniel Macdonald, Ireland and Empire"

Where: Ireland's Great Hunger Museum at Quinnipiac University, 3011 Whitney Ave., Hamden

When: through April 17. The museum, is open Wednesdays, Fridays and Saturdays from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., Thursdays, from 10 a.m. to 7 p.m. and Sundays, from 1 to 5 p.m. Admission is free.

Details: 203-582-6500, ighm.org.