



BOOK REVIEW

Emily Mark-FitzGerald, Ciarán McCabe and Ciarán Reilly, eds. *Dublin and the Great Irish Famine*

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The Great Irish Famine has, since the sesquicentennial anniversary of its outbreak in 1995, been the subject of a steady flow of fantastic scholarship. Over the course of almost thirty years, an interdisciplinary army of authors has considered the catastrophe from a wide range of economic, political, social, and cultural angles. We now have a much clearer sense of where the potato blight came from, in what ways the government did (and did not) respond, and how over two million supposedly poor and ignorant peasants gathered the resources to emigrate around the world.

Yet why, in the midst of all of this great work, have historians of *An Gorta Mór* largely ignored Dublin and other Irish urban areas? In their introduction, Emily Mark-FitzGerald, Ciarán McCabe, and Ciarán Reilly suggest that the answer probably lies in “a wider suspicion of the urban context within the Irish historical experience” (xv). For many nationalist writers, who got the first crack at writing Irish history in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the “true Ireland” was located in the countryside. Dublin and other big cities were dismissed as hotbeds of poverty, moral depravity, English administration, and Protestant loyalism. This volume seeks to open new ground in the field by offering twelve excellent chapters that explore “the effects of the Famine on Dublin, but also the effect of Dublin on the Famine nationally” (xv). The result is an exciting new book, which is sure to appeal to students and scholars of the Great Famine, Dublin itself, and European urban history more generally.

Following a brief overview of the subject by Cormac Ó Gráda, one of the few historians who have previously looked at Dublin during the Great Famine in any detail, the book is divided into four sections of three chapters each. “Section 1: Business Life and Industry” considers the ways in which the city’s commercial sector was impacted by the Famine. In chapter 1, Reilly shows that the vast trade networks that Dublin merchants had built up before the Famine remained intact, allowing shops to continue stocking goods from all over the world (for those who could afford them). Similarly, in chapter 2, Declan Curran shows that while Irish joint-stock banks were largely untroubled by the Famine, this did not change their marginal position as a colonial institution, which positioned them as subsidiaries within the broader British monetary system. Peter Hession (chapter 3) extends the analysis out into the Irish Sea, demonstrating the ways in which maritime technologies played a role in turning the sea into “a critical arena for the application of *laissez-faire* ideology to Ireland” (34).

Although Dublin's role as a port for overseas emigration is not the focus of any chapter, the internal migration of the poor, from the countryside to the city, is an important theme in "Section 2: Charity and Philanthropy." Chapter 4, by Joe Curran, demonstrates that in spite of having a vibrant, philanthropic associational culture in the mid-nineteenth century, Dublin (unlike Edinburgh in Scotland) was viewed as a stateless capital city in decline. Turning from the question of how the city was conceived at this time, McCabe's chapter 5 shows how voluntary charitable societies filled the gap when Dublin's Poor Law workhouses were overwhelmed. Chapter 6, by Rob Goodbody, demonstrates that their experiences as successful businessmen and decentralized leadership system rooted in personal and familiar connections enabled the Quakers to run particularly effective relief operations during the Famine.

Section 3 is on "Institutions, Healthcare, and Mortality." In chapter 7, Philomena Gorey examines maternity and childbirth in Dublin before and after the Great Famine, focusing on the administrative and clinical efficacy of hospitals. She shows how the Famine highlighted a series of shortcomings, especially amongst charitable lying-in hospitals, which led to significant reforms in the late 1850s. Georgina Laragy's chapter 8 considers "the relationship between suicide, trauma, and witnessing famine" (87) by focusing on the suicide of a parochial relief officer named Patrick Bardin. Brian Crowley (chapter 9) looks at Kilmainham Gaol. He demonstrates the ways in which the prison reluctantly evolved during the Famine years from being a site of punishment to become "a place shelter and a source of meagre relief for the poor and the destitute" (98) of Dublin. In the wake of the Famine, as Ireland's population dipped sharply due to excess mortality and emigration, the Irish prison system was steadily reformed and eventually handed over for use by the British military in 1910.

"Section 4: The Famine in Cultural History" considers the ways in which memories of the Famine have been recorded as cultural artifacts. In chapter 10, Christopher Cusack shows that when cities like Dublin appear in works of modern fiction, they often do so in ways used to represent the tension between (urban) modernity and (rural) tradition, and thus unfairly underrepresent the suffering that happened in the cities. Chapter 11, by Kathryn Milligan, echoes the earlier chapters by Reilly and Curran, by analyzing fine art exhibitions in Dublin in the late 1840s, and illustrating that the catastrophe had "little impact on Dublin's exhibition culture" (133). Finally, in a brief "Epilogue: Famine Memory and the City" (chapter 12), Mark-FitzGerald considers the ways in which memories of the Famine exist (though often hidden) in the city itself. She concludes by suggesting that scholars should view the city "as an accumulative and non-linear phenomenon" and thus "reconstitute Dublin and the Famine as a constellation of historical experiences, whose traces are manifest in its records, literatures, images, oralities, materialities, and architectures" (150).

This idea of the Great Famine in Dublin as "a constellation of historical experiences" lies at the heart of this important book because it emphasizes that there are still vast aspects of this subject that remain unexplored. Taken as a whole, the chapters in this edited volume offer exciting new avenues of research into the intertwined histories of Dublin and the Great Famine.