

# A Stone on the Cairn: The Great Famine in Later Gaelic Manuscripts

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Most accounts and studies of the Famine are in English or other languages, even though Irish was the spoken tongue of many if not the majority of those who perished in the catastrophe. Recent research has demonstrated the existence of a challenging body of evidence about the event in twentieth-century folklore sources where Ireland's ancestral voice is prominent.<sup>1</sup> This essay reviews another largely Gaelic archive for the insight it affords on the issue. The vernacular manuscript tradition which evolved in early Christian times remained vigorous down to the nineteenth century.<sup>2</sup> Scribes who lived during or survived the calamity noted different aspects of their experience of it. Their witness is valuable both with regard to specific detail but also in a wider sense. The manuscripts belong to a civilisation acquainted with misfortune. They thus furnish a perspective on distress in general as well as this manifestation of it in particular. These matters are sketched below, following the chronological sequence customary in Famine explorations. It must be stressed from the outset that discussion of certain topics raised (disease, for instance) is necessarily perfunctory because of their technical nature. Nonetheless, the paper will have succeeded if it draws attention to a corpus of information hitherto overlooked in Famine scholarship.

## *Background*

Descriptions of the 'Great Hunger' in Gaelic documentation reflect a well-established pattern of recording various instances of natural or social disorder occurring in Ireland from the early medieval era onwards, together with strategies for coping with them.<sup>3</sup> Data from the seventeenth century show the conti-

1 C. Ó Gráda, *An Drochshaoil: Béaloideas agus Amhráin* (Dublin, 1994). For related material in English see Cathal Póirtéir, 'Folk memory and the Famine' in idem (ed.), *The Great Irish Famine* (Cork, 1995), pp. 219-31, a volume which also mentions (p. 5) its editor's forthcoming extended treatment of the Irish- and English-language folklore evidence.

2 For an excellent description of the culture see P. de Brún, 'Gan Teannta Buirid ná Bínse' in *Comhar* xxxi (1972), xi.

3 The medieval portion of William Wilde's well-known table of Irish famines 900-1850 is principally based on information drawn from the chiefly Gaelic contemporary annals; see E.M. Crawford (ed.), *Famine: The Irish Experience 900-1900* (Edinburgh, 1989), pp. 1-30; similar sources also furnish a considerable amount of the data for the next paper in

nity of this practice into modernity. The harsh winter of 1683-4, when the ground was frozen to a depth of several feet by a cold spell that lasted until summer 1684, is the subject of contemporary commentary in Irish and English, in both verse and prose. The following quatrain is an example of the former medium:

Duisín caogad míle becht. ochtmoghad a trí i néinfecht;  
ó thecht in ríog dhíol ár gcáin. gusín sioc chlaoi na cnapáin.

A dozen fifties, a thousand exactly, eighty and three both together, there were from the Advent of the Great King that paid our fine for us down to the frost that ruined the buds.<sup>4</sup>

Much more was written or composed on the harshness of the years 1739-41 during which sustained bad weather and a series of poor harvests resulted in mortality rates unsurpassed in Ireland until over a century later, if even then.<sup>5</sup> Other forms of adversity were remarked on down to the outbreak of the Famine itself. Cholera spread throughout the country in 1832. Scribes observed its arrival in their localities, and copied prayers to be said to overcome its effects together with other reflections on its implications.<sup>6</sup>

Given the diverse ways the tradition registers such phenomena, it seems appropriate to treat with greater care statements couched in imaginative terms which may nonetheless accurately reflect the affairs of the nation on the eve of the Famine. This applies to the poem commencing 'Céad míle fáilte romhat, a bhanríon na scéimhe!' ('A hundred thousand welcomes to you, o beautiful queen!'). The piece, attributed to the Gaelic enthusiast and versifier Brian Ó

the same volume, M.C. Lyons, 'Weather, Famine, Pestilence and Plague in Ireland, 900-1500' (pp. 31-74).

4 The quatrain occurs in British Library MS Egerton 161: f. 35 b, and has been edited and translated by S.H. O'Grady, *Catalogue of Irish Manuscripts in the British Museum* (London, 1926), i, p. 609. For a note in English on the frost in a Gaelic source see RIA MS 23 L 34: p. 249 i. H.H. Lamb, *Climate, History and the Modern World* (London and New York, 1982), pp. 221-3 describes the nature and impact of contemporary weather conditions; I thank Kenneth Nicholls, Department of History, UCC, for the latter reference.

5 Some of the relevant material has been published by C.G. Buttimer, 'An Irish text on the "War of Jenkins' Ear"' in *Celtica* xxi (1990), pp. 75-98, and P.A. Breatnach, 'Togha na héigse 1700-1800' in *Éigse* xxvii (1993), pp. 120-1. For the context see D. Dickson, 'The Other Great Irish Famine' in Póirtéir (ed.), *The Great Irish Famine*, pp. 50-9; cf. also idem, 'The Gap in Famines: A Useful Myth?' in Crawford (ed.), *Famine: The Irish Experience*, pp. 96-111.

6 The presence of cholera in Cork is noted in RIA MS 23 C 19: p. 346 i, for example. For a prayer to be said against it see Maynooth MS R 66: p. 394. UCC Torna MS T.xxiv: pp. 129 ff. contains a sermon which appears to deal with the disease.

Tumultaigh (Bernard Tumulty) from Drogheda, was apparently composed in 1845 when a visit by Queen Victoria to Ireland was thought imminent.<sup>7</sup> The text is an address in the latter's honour, praising her appearance and character as she arrives to consolidate her friendship with the Irish public. The work underlines the extent to which the people of Ireland are in need of whatever assistance and good-will the monarch can provide:

Uch! a bhanríon mhín! 's gan aon nduine leár n-éagaoín!  
 'Gus inn creachta, 'gus gointe, 'gus scaipthe chum gach réigiúin,  
 Gan éadach, gan oideas 'nár seachránaithe sclábhaithe,  
 Is dream an uabhair ár ndiaidh sa mbaile go cumhachtach!<sup>8</sup>

...  
 'S na mílte fáil bháis tré anródh 's na críochaibh!  
 A Dhé uilechumhachtaigh! cá bhfuil creideamh an Bhíobla?

Alas! gentle queen!, there is no one to lament us! We are destroyed and injured and scattered to every region, unclad, unlettered, like wandering slaves, and a haughty crew pursue us powerfully at home!

...  
 There are thousands dying of distress in the land! Omnipotent God! where is the faith of the Bible?

If the Famine was not in progress by the time these lines were completed, the poem may nevertheless already foreshadow the circumstances in which the tragedy would shortly unfold.

Letters from the late 1840s reveal that Ó Tumultaigh's optimism respecting the British sovereign was not universally shared. William Hackett from Midleton, county Cork, member of a prosperous local distilling family and an amateur of Irish antiquities, corresponded regularly with the county Louth Gaelic scholar Nioclás Ó Cearnaigh (Nicholas O'Kearney), by then resident in Dublin.<sup>9</sup> In

7 The item occurs in RIA MS 23 E 12: pp. 258-9. Spelling in the following excerpts from this and other contemporary verse is standardized to reflect late twentieth-century editorial practices, and changes in punctuation have also been introduced. (Prose excerpts in which metrical guidance is absent will not be standardised, and will be subjected to minimal alterations in punctuation.) My English translations of both verse and prose citations are intended to be literal but not such as to impede readability. B. Ó Buachalla, *I mBéal Feirste cois Cuain* (Dublin, 1968), Treoir, s.n. Tumulty, Bernard, provides information on the poet.

8 The MS reads *cómhaach*.

9 See S. Duffy, *Nicholas O'Kearney: The Last of the Bards of Louth* (Coalisland, 1989) and S. Ó Dufaigh and D. Ó Doibhlin, *Nioclás Ó Cearnaigh: Beatha Agus Saothar* (Dublin, 1989) for O'Kearney. I thank Professor Seán Ó Coileáin for making these items available to me, and for helpful comments on an earlier draft of the article. Hackett's interest in Irish culture has been explored by B. Ó Conchúir, *Scriobhaithe Chorcaí 1700-1850* (Dub-

1849 Hackett wrote to his colleague that 'The country people here have a tradition that the reign of a queen is portentous of evil to Ireland', citing popular recollections of dispossession in the time of Mary Tudor, or the 'fire sword famine' of her sister, Elizabeth I's age.<sup>10</sup> Another Gaelic document suggests the excommunication imposed on Martin Luther at the Council of Trent was due to expire in 1845.<sup>11</sup> However improbable the latter consideration, at least it demonstrates that differing degrees of sentiment and veracity inform pre-Famine Gaelic discourse. Equivalent levels of perception and understanding surface again in representations of the disaster itself.

### *The Great Famine in Gaelic manuscript evidence*

The causes, development, duration and effects of the Famine are currently receiving renewed notice.<sup>12</sup> The following summary of these points is intended merely to highlight the event's more significant moments for the purpose of structuring presentation of the various kinds of Irish-language testimony subsequently considered. A hitherto unfamiliar disease (*phytophthora infestans*) struck the potato crop – the staple food of considerable sections of the population – in the autumn of 1845. Matters worsened when the crop's 1846 harvest failed drastically, leading to the serious deterioration of early 1847. Illnesses coinciding with mass starvation proved as devastating as food shortages proper in many cases. Privately-sponsored or publicly-supported relief measures were augmented or developed, including the work-house system or construction schemes, while substitute foodstuffs like meal were also imported in response to current exigencies. The fact that hundreds of thousands of people had lost their lives before it abated confirms the magnitude of the crisis.

Manuscript sources shed light on each of these stages, as the following outline reveals. Contemporaries were obviously aware of the difficulties affecting the primary source of sustenance. In a composition entitled 'Laoi cascartha na

lin, 1982), Innéacs, s.n., idem, 'Thomas Swanton, Réamhchonraitheoir in Iar-Chairbre' in *Journal of the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society*, xcvi (1993), pp. 50–60, especially note 62, and in the aforementioned volumes on O'Kearney.

10 The correspondence occurs in RIA MS 24 E 20: p. 286.

11 See NLI MS G 306: p. 129.

12 C. Kinealy, *This Great Calamity: The Irish Famine 1845–52* (Dublin, 1994) offers a comprehensive account of the period. References in Ó Gráda, *An Drochshaoil's* bibliography to articles and books not mentioned by Kinealy should be noted, together with C. Ó Gráda, *Ireland: A New Economic History 1780–1939* (Oxford, 1994), pp. 173–209 and the papers in Póirtéir (ed.), *The Great Irish Famine*. Two earlier titles now enjoy a classic status, R. Dudley-Edwards and T. Desmond Williams (eds), *The Great Famine: Studies in Irish History, 1845–52* (Dublin, 1956), re-issued in 1994, and C. Woodham-Smith, *The Great Hunger* (London, 1962), though these works contain little if any discussion of Irish-language sources.

bpotátaí' ('A poem on the potatoes' destruction') the midlands versifier and scribe Peadar Ó Gealacáin (Peter Gallegan) speaks of 'ár saorbharr breá séanmhar' ('our noble, auspicious crop') being 'i lámha an éaga' ('in death's hand's').<sup>13</sup> In its absence, other forms of nourishment were of little consequence, he claims:

Níl rófhlaith gan eolchaire<sup>14</sup> is éagnach  
 's ní sómasach a dhéantar a bhféasta,  
 fion Spáinneach, beoir ársa no tea glan  
 ní áirím gur sású sin d'aon neach.

There is not a great leader without sorrow or lamentation, and their feasting is not relaxed. Spanish wine, mature beer or pure tea, I do not believe these satisfy any one.

O Gealacáin suggests the following measures to safeguard the potato harvest are ineffective:

Ní d'fion dóibh balla daingean dá thréine,  
 scioból nó lafta nó cagework,  
 nó beannacht na sagart nó éigse,  
 i n-uaimh thalmhan dá gcasadh 'na sréathaibh.

A firm wall, however strong, does not protect them, neither does a barn, a loft or cagework, or the priests' or poets' benediction when they are in a pit in the ground being turned in rows.

The last-mentioned quatrain demonstrates the rootedness of contemporary versification in the world around it. A further composition survives in which measures reminiscent of certain of the foregoing are recommended to preserve the potato crop. This bilingual prose work in the form of a printed page is now located among a set of mainly handwritten records.<sup>15</sup> It bears the title 'Extract from the Letter of a "Western Rector"', with an Irish-language version 'Páirt don' litir fhir Seagailse [sic] 'san Iarthar' facing. The text and its accompanying diagram describe how to select and arrange a pit to keep potatoes free of disease:

Togh ionad tirim spearuimhil don bpoll. Ann sin dean poll-gaoithe leathan go leor, air barra na talmhan, a bhfoirm thrinse osguilte no abhfoirm linteire, le gearadh thrinse naoi norluighe no troig ar leathad 7 ar

<sup>13</sup> This text is found in NLI MS G 199: pp. 330-4. Ó Buachalla, *I mBéal Feirste cois Cuain*, passim, deals with its author.

<sup>14</sup> *ulcaire* is the MS reading.

<sup>15</sup> See RIA MS 3 C 7: p. 364.

doimhneachd, 7 le cuir mion cloch air a dtreasna air. Tarraig an trinse no an linteirese air fhad an phoill 7 fag osguilte 'na dha cheann e, ionnus go ngeabhach an ghaoth thrid go thaosga. Chum na gaoithe a ghabhail nios fear (an nidh is nios [sic] riochdanaiche), dean poill-gaoithe a dtaobhaibh an phoill a m-ballaibh go reasanta a bh-fad o cheile. Air urlar an t-rinse se deantar an poll, ag tabhairt aire air poill-gaoithe d'fagailt ag an bharr, chum an gal a leigint amach. Is uraisd e so a dheanamh le fòid a chasadh tiomchuil feac ráine.

Let a dry and airy site be chosen for the pit; then let an air-pipe or funnel be made, of tolerable width, either on the surface of the ground, in form of a French drain, or in that of a lantern, by cutting a trench nine inches or a foot in depth and breadth, and laying stones loosely across it; and let this funnel be carried the whole intended length of the pit, and left open at both ends, freely to admit the air. To render the ventilation – and ventilation is the great desideratum – still more complete, let air-holes be made in the sides of the pit, at moderate distances.

The English version of the succeeding set of instructions (the copy of which is slightly damaged in parts) is as follows:

Over this frame-work let [...] pit be constructed, care being taken to leave valves or air-holes at the top, which may be done by the simple process of a sod turned round the handle of a spade, to permit the escape of the heated air. In a word, *let the air pass freely underneath the pit, and allow it an easy escape above.* Thus will the pit be kept cool – the progress of fermentation effectually checked – and the Potato, even though diseased, preserved. I found it so with my own pits. The Potato, which was put in diseased and soft, came out dry and hard, and the affected part came off by a touch of the nail like a dry scab, leaving the Potato dry and healed beneath it.

The Irish excerpt shows the influence of conventional, literary spelling but also traces of dialect and speech patterns. It probably echoes real-life debate about how to counter the potato blight. If it is indeed the work of a Protestant minister, the item may further illustrate the assistance members of the established church rendered their fellow-citizens (regardless of denominational interest), examples of which are known for many areas of the country.

These counsels were largely ineffective in the absence of a proper scientific comprehension of both the nature of and the cure for the disease. Irish-language evidence is at one with its counterpart in English in revealing the fate in store for many. Mícheál Ó Raghallaigh (Michael O'Riely) from west county Clare

(one of the worst-affected regions) has left this description of the situation in his district during one of the Famine's most notorious phases. The scribe had a deep regard for traditional Irish historiography; the entry, which reads like a medieval annal, is typical of his annotation of contemporary early nineteenth-century incidents:

AD 1847 Bliadhain na gortan .7 an riachtanais. Oir do sgríos an ghaothruadh blath .7 gasa na bpotátuídhe. ionnus gur loibh siad uile. Ní raibh potátá le buaint as talamh ag aon duine san bfomhar mur badh gnáth. bliadhanta eile. Ní raibh an corcaidh go maith mur badh gnáth. na an mhin ann. Dá bhrígh sin bhí gorta .7 riachtannais air gach aon duine san ríoghacht acht tanaig iliomad minne .7 earbhuir go hÉirinn as *America* .7 as ríoghachtuibh eile. D'eug mórán do na daoine an gach áit san ríoghacht. Fiabhrus .7 tinnios cuirp do thanaig orra do bhár an oicrais .7 is leis a déug na daoine san tír seo. Do thuit breis .7 míle duine san bporóiste so. ar feadh trí mhídh .i. Cill Mhainnithinn a cCorcamruadh.

AD 1847 The year of famine and need, because the strong wind destroyed the potatoes' flowers and stems, so that they all rotted. Nobody had a potato to pick from the earth in autumn as was usual in other years. Oats were not as good as usual, nor was there meal. Therefore everyone in the kingdom was famished and in want, but much meal and corn came to Ireland from America and other realms. Many people died everywhere in the kingdom. Fever and sickness overcame them as a result of hunger, and that is how people in this country died. More than a thousand fell in this parish in three months, i.e. Kilmanaheen in Corcamroe.<sup>16</sup>

The months are not specified, but they probably encompass the start of the year when conditions were likely to have been particularly adverse. A further Gaelic document sheds additional light on the timing and character of the crisis Ó Raghallaigh mentions. The scribe Séamus Ó Caoindealbháin (James Quinlivan), when residing in the neighbourhood of Askeaton, county Limerick, copied a text entitled 'Oráid a naímsir plágha et doghruingeádhá eile' ('An oration in time of plague and other difficulties'), beginning 'A Dhia na Trócaire, A Dhia na truaighmhéile' ('O God of mercy, O God of pity').<sup>17</sup> He dated it 'an tochtmadh lá iar fídhche d'óigimhí 1847' (perhaps 28 January). An English-language pre-

16 Maynooth MS R 70: p. 490. This Gaelic composition should be further explored in the context of the type of extant local evidence for county Clare listed in D. Lindsay and D. Fitzpatrick (eds), *Records of the Irish Famine: A Guide to Local Archives, 1840-1855* (Dublin, 1993), passim.

17 NLI MS G 326: p. 391. B. Ó Madagáin, *An Ghaeilge i Luimneach 1700-1900* (Dublin, 1974), pp. 81-4 offers a short account of Quinlivan.

scription occurs shortly after the oration in the same source and may hint at the 'plague' Ó Caoidealbháin had in mind: 'One drop of Hydrocyanic acid, and one drop of creasote, with an ounce of cinnamon water immediately arrests the spasmodic action of cholera.'<sup>18</sup> The shortage of food, the prevalence of disease and the accompanying psychological trauma had a negative impact on such other features of normal life as fertility and reproduction.<sup>19</sup> Impediments to these functions may be at issue in a composition beginning 'O Iesus Crist, son of the dibhine bounty of God be my aid'; the copyist Riocard Paor (Richard Power) transcribed the work and dated it 30 September 1850.<sup>20</sup> The item's preface (in which Gaelic spelling conventions are readily detectible) alludes specifically to child-birth:

The follóing prayer hath ma[n]y remarcable properties, so as to obtain a good death to any person who says it debhoutly once aday [*sic*], with a good intention to the glóri of God, and debhótion of the Blessed Bhirgin. And saying it debhoutly for any woman in labour, it forwards with God's blessing, a speedy and safe delibherí, with many other benefits.<sup>21</sup>

Riocard Paor was then employed in the 'Districth [*sic*] Lunatic Asylum Waterford.'

Ó Raghallaigh's account mentioned schemes established to assist the needy. These figure in our manuscript sources also. A record of payments made to road workers in the neighbourhood of Fieries, north of Killarney, county Kerry, is found in a document compiled by the scribe Gearóid Mac Gearailt (Garrett FitzGerald) from the same county.<sup>22</sup> The period of payment seems to be from November 1846-January 1847, comprising some of the Famine's more critical moments. The decline in their customary sources of support meant that exponents of native culture would have required this and other types of assistance as a matter of urgency. Edmund Bennet from Croom, county Limerick, corresponded on 5 October 1847 with Waterford-born Seán Ó Dálaigh (John O Daly), a Gaelic enthusiast and bookseller then living in Dublin, stating he had recently earned little 'as school teaching has in a great degree failed in my neigh-

18 NLI MS G 326: p. 410.

19 For a discussion of this matter see P. Hickey, 'Famine, Mortality and Emigration: A Profile of Six Parishes in the Poor Law Union of Skibbereen, 1846-7' in P. O'Flanagan and C.G. Buttimer (eds), *Cork: History and Society* (Dublin, 1993), pp. 873-918 (especially 897-9).

20 NLI MS G 506: p. 302. E. Ó Súilleabháin, 'Scríobhaithe Phort Láirge 1700-1900' in W. Nolan and T. Power (eds), *Waterford: History and Society* (Dublin, 1992), pp. 293-5 discusses the scribe.

21 P. Ó Macháin, *Catalogue of Irish manuscripts in the National Library of Ireland* (Dublin, 1990), xi, pp. 14-15 has published this English entry.

22 NLI MS G 400: pp. 253-74.



bourhood.<sup>23</sup> Within a year, Corkman John Windele (1801–65), a court official and patron of Irish scholars, wrote to Ó Dálaigh as follows: ‘people have no money for literature. Scarcely any even for food which promises to run up to a high figure.’<sup>24</sup> The plight of the learned conveyed in this remark is borne out in the following instance. On completing a version of the poet Eoghan Rua Ó Súilleabháin’s song ‘Cois abhann inné ’s mé ag taisteal i gcéin’ in 1847, a copyist from the east-Cork parish of Ballynoe earnestly implores an unidentified person to continue providing patronage in this troubled address:

Gaibh leathsgeal na locht do cidhfir annso am dhíaig da bhrigh gur tré bhuaireamh aigne, 7 ríachtanas an tsaoghuilsí mé féin 7 mo mhuirrear air easba bídh 7 eadaig, do sgríobhas an beagán so, 7 aithcim air tonóir feachuinn le suil na tuadhmhéile orruinn 7 comhair éigin do thabhart orruinn. do bhrigh nach fuil dfalltas agam acht corroin annsa tseachtmhuin a faire lae 7 ófhdche. Guídhim fad saoghail fa meanamna 7 fa luthghair an sláinte mhaith, 7 a crích mhaith do bheith air dhéire do beatha. Is mise do seirbhiseach dileas go bás; Seáadhan Ó Moihill Gleantán.

Please excuse the errors you see in what follows, because it is on account of mental distress and the necessities of life – I and my family being in want of food and clothing – that I have written this little amount. I beseech your honour to look mercifully upon us and to assist us in some way, because my only income is a crown a week for guarding day and night. I wish you a long, high-spirited, happy and healthy life, and a good conclusion at the end of your days. I remain your faithful servant until death, Seán Ó Moithill, Glaunthane.<sup>25</sup>

Help was not always forthcoming when requested. The Famine fostered evasiveness in human relations, whether through greed, a hoarding mentality or to avoid contact with the sick and the infected. This hesitancy appears to surface in the Gaelic evidence as well. Could the presence of a short discourse on ‘our national weights and measures’, discussing the demerits of the metric system, now found in a Cork manuscript of 1846, indirectly reflect anxiety about such topics as the proper estimation and equitable distribution of relief supplies?<sup>26</sup> A

23 NLI MS G 389: pp. 179–81; see also N. Ní Shéaghda, *Catalogue of Irish manuscripts in the National Library of Ireland* (Dublin, 1986), ix, p. 23.

24 NLI MS G 389: pp. 335–7, Ní Shéaghda, *Catalogue ... National Library of Ireland*, ix, p. 27. Ó Conchúir, *Scríobhaithe Chorcaí*, pp. 188–90 discusses Windele.

25 NLI MS G 691: p. 22, published by Ní Shéaghda, *Catalogue ... National Library of Ireland*, xii, pp. 94–5 (incorporating slight modifications to her punctuation and other readings, following a comparison with the MS). For the scribe see Ó Conchúir, *Scríobhaithe Chorcaí*, p. 163.

26 NLI MS G 659: pp. 121–3.

further Cork document from 1851 contains an account of the identification of a person's character from his complexion.<sup>27</sup> Even though the tract seems to focus on moral traits, might there have been a preoccupation with tokens of physical well-being (or its opposite) also? Finally one may note the survival of 'A sermon preached by the Revd John Meany, Parish Priest of Kilrossenty, Co. of Waterford' transcribed in 1850. Its theme is 'Air Charthanacht nó Grádh na cComharsan' ('On Charity or Love of Neighbour').<sup>28</sup> Was the latter as scarce as other commodities in Gaelic society in mid-century?

Meany's sermon was composed in Irish, but the Famine brought the language's very survival as a widespread vernacular seriously into question. This fact became apparent to various persons interested in both it and its culture. The aforementioned Seán Ó Dálaigh spoke of the marginalisation of Gaelic in a lecture to a Dublin Confederate Club in November 1847.<sup>29</sup> The events of the day are uppermost in the speaker's mind: 'Alas poor Ireland! and that you are poor and hungry and starved every thing about you plainly indicates.' Ó Dálaigh traces the language's persecution since the arrival of the Normans. He argues it would be inappropriate to jettison it now, as it is capable of developing a sense of identity and self-worth in Irish people of a kind he deems particularly desirable in present circumstances. When considered as a medium of communication, the lecturer claims Gaelic phonology is 'more peculiarly adapted to the descriptions of the soft, tender, plaintive and elegiac kind'! Others promoted the cause of Irish differently. John Windele appears to have petitioned the Registrar General to include a question on its status as a spoken language in the 1851 census, the first occasion on which such information was elicited.<sup>30</sup> Data in this and succeeding censuses have greatly assisted the study of the complex decline of Gaelic in the nineteenth century and after.<sup>31</sup> The erosion of other aspects of indigenous civilisation attracted notice also. William Wilde began to collect remnants of Irish folk belief before the informants themselves would be swept away. He corresponded with certain of the scholars previously mentioned in this account, William Hackett from Midleton and Dublin-based Nioclás Ó Cearnaigh, asking for assistance with his undertaking.<sup>32</sup> Even though contact

27 NLI MS G 662: pp. 84-5.

28 RIA MS 23 O 71: pp. 206 ff. Ó Súilleabháin, 'Scríobhathie Phort Láirge', p. 291 discusses the priest. D.A. Kerr, 'A Nation of Beggars?: Priests, People, and Politics in Famine Ireland 1846-1852' (Oxford, 1994), particularly pp. 30-68, has explored the role of the Catholic clergy in the Famine. S. Connolly, *Religion and Society in Nineteenth-Century Ireland* (Dundalk, 1985) summarises the wider background.

29 NLI MS G 416, a manuscript devoted entirely to the lecture.

30 For a draft of the letter see RIA MS 12 C 2: p. 583. Windele's summary of the results of the 1851 Census may be found in RIA MS 12 M 12: ff. 830-1.

31 M. Nic Craith, *Malartú teanga: an Ghaeilge i gCorcaigh sa Naou hAois Déag* (Bremen, 1993) details scholarship on this issue.

32 Wilde sought information on popular customs from William Hackett in early 1849, as Hackett's letter to O'Kearney dated 31 March of the same year indicates; see RIA MS

between them later broke down, publications like the pioneering *Irish Popular Superstitions* (1852) demonstrate that Wilde's work bore fruit. His account of the manner whereby rural depopulation diminished the vitality of the native tradition is one of the more haunting evocations of the Famine's immediate consequences.

Large-scale emigration followed hard on the heels of other losses and added to the sense of devastation.<sup>33</sup> This subject would require extended treatment in its own right, but one may highlight the presence of information on it in the Gaelic record, where it features in both Irish- and English-language compositions. Take, for instance, the didactic verse on the proper behaviour of an exile beginning 'Ar farraige má thaistilir le cúrsa an tsaoil' ('If you travel overseas on life's journey'), copied by the scribe Mícheál Ó hÉalaithe (Michael Healy) from Kilcorney, county Cork, in a manuscript written during 1846-52.<sup>34</sup> Brian Ó Luanaigh (Brian O'Looney) from county Clare transcribed sentimental pieces like 'The Emigrant's Farewell by Patrick Higgins ...', a poem which begins 'I'm leaving you at last Mary', in a document he completed in the years 1850-60.<sup>35</sup> A fuller picture of Gaelic speakers' experience of departure might emerge from considering this material jointly with other similar forms of testimony, particularly entries in folklore sources.<sup>36</sup>

### Explanations

It is therefore clear that the Famine did not pass by unobserved in contemporary Gaelic manuscripts. The scribes also considered the event's origins and import. Their attitude towards these issues is more complex than might be imagined could emerge in the Irish-speaking world. We may return to those musings of Peadar Ó Gealacháin which provided an initial impression of the potato blight, the disaster's proximate cause.<sup>37</sup> Ó Gealacháin felt that more profound forces underlay the catastrophe:

24 E 20: p. 227. See also Duffy, *Nicholas O'Keamey*, pp. 76-82, Ó Dufaigh and Ó Doibhlin, *Nicolas Ó Cearnaigh*, pp. 66-70.

33 David Fitzpatrick, *Irish Emigration 1801-1924* (Dundalk, 1985) sketches the phenomenon.

34 NLI MS G 422: p. 343.

35 NLI MS G 634 (a): p. 54.

36 The text given in Ó Gráda, *An Drochshaol*, pp. 70-1 deserves to be contrasted with NLI MS G 250.186 [3]. See also G. Neville, ' "She Never Then After That Forgot Him": Irishwomen and Emigration to the United States in Irish Folklore' in *Mid-America: an Historical Review* lxxiv, 3 (October, 1992), pp. 271-89 for a treatment of associated material.

37 See above, note 13.

'Sé shílím, 's ní scríobhaimse bréaga,  
's bíodh a fhianaise ag saothibh atá aosta,  
gurb é dhíbir ar saorbharr breá séanmhar  
ceart Chríosta ar dhaoithibh gan chéadfá.

It is my opinion, and I write no lie – may venerable learned people be  
my witness – that what banished our noble, auspicious crop was Christ's  
vengeance on senseless fools.

The people incurred the Creator's displeasure because of their immoderate in-  
terest in the affairs of this world, in dancing, dressing and disputation:

Tráth chonaic Dia gach olc 's gach mí-rún,  
goid is fuadach, feall is daorbhreith,  
's gach peaca eile dárbh fhéidir smaoineadh,  
d'fhéach sé anuas le fuath is le míoscais.

Is iomdha fógra fuair na daoine  
le heaspáí, tinte is fóirneart gaoithe,  
pláigh is gorta, ocras is íota,  
is piónóstaí eile nach féidir dom míneadh.

As siocair gach olc dár tharla i nÉirinn  
d'éag na potátaí, mo chrá 's mo ghéar-ghoin,  
ach a Rí na ngrása a bhásaíos na céadta  
go sábhála tú feasta iad trí do dhaonnacht.

When God saw each evil and each ignoble ambition, theft and ravishing,  
treachery and ill-judgement, and all other sins imaginable, he looked  
down with hatred and anger.

People received many warnings, want, fire and storms, plagues and fam-  
ines, hunger and thirst and other inestimable punishments.

As a result of all of Ireland's evils the potatoes died, my grief and tor-  
ment! But, graceful King who dispatches hundreds, save them hence-  
forth through your humanity.

Would other members of the Gaelic community agree with Ó Gealacháin's  
contention that the Famine arose from divine retribution? One might initially  
be disposed to think so on learning of the existence of an Irish-language tract  
entitled *Craobhscaoile No Mininiughadh Leabhar An Taisbeanach (An Exploration*

or an *Explanation of the Book of Revelations*). Aindrias Ó Súilleabháin (Andrew O'Sullivan), a scribe from Cahirciveen, county Kerry, copied the compilation in 1854.<sup>38</sup> The celebrated New Testament book in question describes the painful destruction to be visited on the earth's inhabitants in general and on sinners in particular at the end of the world. Could 'certain' sections of the Irish population have thought that apocalyptic predictions were being verified in their case in Famine times as a result of their own innate defects? Other moralising texts were replicated in significant numbers immediately before and after 1850. These include the poem frequently designated 'Comhrá an Bháis agus an Duine Thinn' ('The Conversation between Death and the Patient'). Might the Gaelic-speaking public have largely concurred with the latter's viewpoint that human beings are by nature inherently imperfect and incapable of escaping decay? Death boasts of his achievements in the following vein during his colloquy with the Patient:

Beirim an t-óg ó dheól na gcóch liom,  
 Beirim an leanbh 's a bhanaltra i n-aoineacht,  
 Beirim an fear óna mhnaoi liom,  
 Beirim an té phós araoir liom,  
 Beirim na boicht liom bhíos ag dífolaim.

I take with me the sucking infant,  
 I take the child and nurse together,  
 I take the husband from his partner,  
 I take the one who wed last evening,  
 I take with me the poor a-begging.<sup>39</sup>

One can only wonder at the chords these lines struck in readers or listeners during the Great Hunger. The advice which accompanies them is that Man should seek solace from the spiritual comfort provided by prayer and holy persons like saints rather than in worthless worldly wealth.<sup>40</sup>

The Book of Revelations' complex message has been interpreted in various ways. One of its meanings appears to be that God's faithful followers will be spared while their enemies are destroyed in the final cataclysm. The aforementioned excursus on the Apocalypse Aindrias Ó Súilleabháin wrote out in 1854 is

38 NLI MS G 368: pp. 329-47.

39 The lines are cited from RIA MS 23 L 24: p. 80 (not written during the Great Famine). Analogues to the work's bleak atmosphere may be found in J. Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages* (Anchor Books edition, New York, 1954).

40 A comparison between the use made of literature as an aid to recovery from disaster and traditional communities' employment of folklore for the same purpose may be worthwhile; for the latter strategy see L. Minc, 'Scarcity and survival: the role of oral tradition in mediating subsistence crises' in *Journal of Archaeological Anthropology* v, 1 (March, 1986), pp. 39-113 and also the Conclusion of this essay.

in fact a model of Catholic apologetics, anathematising Protestantism as the ultimate object of divine anger. Others in the Gaelic world seem to have drawn a correspondingly firm distinction between the just and wrongdoers in the Famine context. Certain copyists suggest the event was perpetrated treacherously on the Irish who did not deserve their fate. This sentiment may be implicit in the writings of the Clareman Mícheál Ó Raghallaigh, one of whose texts was explored above. On completing a version of a devotional tract he states he stopped 'a dtarradh lá fithchíod do Lúmhnas AD 1848 .i. bliadhainn an áir 7 an ocráis ionnar éag na millte duine le huireasbadh bígh' ('the 22 August AD 1848 i.e. the year of slaughter and hunger during which thousands died for want of food').<sup>41</sup> Even if the connotations of the term *áir* ('slaughter') are not absolutely incontrovertible, it would be difficult to doubt the opinion of another copyist from the same county regarding events similar to those Ó Raghallaigh relates. Brian Ó Luanaigh who transcribed the emigration poem 'I'm leaving you at last Mary' noted earlier stated it was 'Written after the odious extermination of 47.'<sup>42</sup>

Statements of a more comprehensive kind than these brief comments are also extant. Nioclás Ó Cearnaigh's verse composition 'Éire án gan cháim ba luchtmar' ('Illustrious unblemished Ireland was bountiful'), which he himself entitles 'Cruadh-ghorta na h-Éiríonn noch chrádh a clannain go díochrach feadh 1846.7.8' ('Ireland's harsh famine, which grievously tormented its children during 1846.7.8'), consists of one hundred and twenty-five quatrains.<sup>43</sup> The poet examines the calamity against the backdrop of this country's historic relations with Britain. Ireland prospered until such time as contact between the two islands was established. The relationship appears never to have favoured the Irish, when one recollects matters like the suffering inflicted on them during Cromwell's presence here or the iniquitous Penal Laws. Ó Cearnaigh blames the English government unequivocally for this latest instance of criminal neglect on its part, indicting such figures as the Prime Minister, Lord John Russell, and the Lord Lieutenant, George William Frederick Villiers, fourth earl of Clarendon:

Seán beag Ruiséal pocán gan éifeacht  
 Bhí an tan ina cheannphort ós na réigiúin;  
 Fear ionaid an Rí i nÁth Cliath níorbh fhéarr é  
 Clarendon ciapach, cíorlach, scléipeach.

41 Maynooth MS R 69: p. 427 *m*, published by P. Ó Fiannachta, *Lámhscríbhinní Gaeilge Choláiste Phádraig, Má Nuad: Clár* (Maynooth, 1967), iv, p. 67.

42 NLI MS G 634 (a): p. 54.

43 NLI MS G 545, described by Ó Macháin, *Catalogue ... National Library of Ireland*, xi, pp. 79-80. The text is not given in Ó Dufaigh and Ó Doibhlin, *Nioclás Ó Cearnaigh*.

Little John Russell, a bloated, ineffectual fellow  
 Was at that time commander of the regions;  
 The King's deputy [*sic*] in Dublin was no better,  
 The tormenting, upsetting braggart Clarendon.

Irish landlords such as William Gregory (afterwards husband of William Butler Yeats's colleague Lady Augusta Gregory) merit censure as well for their merciless conduct towards their tenants:

Bhí stócach bríobach i gcríochaibh Chonnacht,  
 Greagoire íocas, fíor a ainm,  
 Do rinn' sé dlíge do dhícheuir céadta  
 I ngach crích de chríochaibh Éireann.

There was a bribing youth in the province of Connacht, paying Gregory – his name is accurate – he made a law which banished hundreds in each of the territories of Ireland.

Ó Cearnaigh was associated with the Young Ireland nationalist movement, and his contact with this organisation might have given an edge to the foregoing work's partisanship.<sup>44</sup> The movement's anti-Britishness increased as a consequence of the Famine. The organisation supported the 1848 rebellion against a state system which could allow a tragedy of such proportions to take place, in its opinion.<sup>45</sup> The survival in contemporary Gaelic sources of verse compositions supporting certain of the rebellion's leaders may strengthen the impression that Irish speakers viewed the Famine as an injustice.<sup>46</sup> There is a final oblique hint of scribes' attitudes towards the tragedy. In 'Éire án gan cháim ba luchtmhar' Nioclás Ó Cearnaigh employed the type of metre and form characteristic of seventeenth-century Gaelic political poetry lamenting Ireland's fate in Cromwellian and later times.<sup>47</sup> This verse was copied abundantly during the late 1840s and 1850s,<sup>48</sup> a sign, perhaps, of the manner in which contemporary hardships were envisioned.

44 For this contact see Duffy, *O'Keamey*, pp. 31-8, Ó Dufaigh and Ó Doibhlin, *Nioclás Ó Cearnaigh*, pp. 28-34.

45 See K. T. Hoppen, *Ireland since 1800: Conflict & Conformity* (London and New York, 1989), pp. 28-31.

46 See the poem entitled 'Lament of Wm. Smith O'Brien and the State convicts of 1849' in NLI MS G 634 (a): pp. 32-3 and the papers relating to the 'State trials at Clonmel in 1848' in RIA MS 12 O 17 (3).

47 C. O'Rahilly (ed.), *Five Seventeenth-Century Political Poems* (Dublin, 1952).

48 See, for example, NLI MS G 422: pp. 212 ff. ('Aiste Dháibhí Cúndún', dated August 1846), *ibid.*: pp. 282 ff. ('Aiste Sheáin Uí Chonaill', dated February 1852), Maynooth MS DR 4: p. 315 ('Aiste Sheáin Uí Chonaill', MS dated 1854).

### Conclusion

This paper does not aim to apportion responsibility for the Great Famine, but seeks instead to focus attention on a distinctive body of evidence about it. A comparison of the event with similar occurrences elsewhere will probably reveal whether circumstances other than an unavoidable natural disaster contributed to the débâcle. In this connection, when Gaelic speakers contrasted their conditions with those of other communities, particularly from the seventeenth century onwards, the history of the people of Israel was frequently invoked.<sup>49</sup> Coincidentally, the fiftieth anniversary of the liberation of the death camps is being remembered in Europe as the commencement of the Famine one hundred and fifty years ago is recalled in Ireland. One could scarcely claim that the planned and casual brutality of the former was on the same scale as the latter. Nonetheless, there are striking parallels between the nineteenth-century Irish case and that of Jewish and other groups in the twentieth century. The following reminiscences of an English army officer relating to his service in Germany in 1945 echo the situation in Ireland approximately a hundred years previously in some uncanny respects. Captain Robert Daniell was in pursuit of German troops fleeing eastwards when he came across train carriages full of rotting corpses. He suspected a concentration camp was nearby, and sought his superior's permission to investigate. The journalist who has recently published the story<sup>50</sup> reports the captain's memories of entering the compound thus:

Behind the first door he broke open he found the camp hospital, a hangar full of bunk beds eight tiers high. Every bed was occupied, but 90 per cent of the patients were dead, many of them drowned in excreta from the beds above ... He visited three more buildings. In the first two were hundreds of people, as thin as skeletons, in the last stages of starvation ... In the third hangar Daniell found the swollen, naked body of a woman, five or six days dead, and sitting on it, playing at drawing lots with straw, a group of young children.

Daniell's own final words are as follows:

49 This understanding persists into the twentieth century. For a well-known instance see 'What points of contact existed between these languages ['ancient Hebrew' and 'ancient Irish'] and between the peoples who spoke them? ... their dispersal, persecution, survival and revival', James Joyce, *Ulysses* ([1922] Penguin Modern Classics edition, Harmondsworth, 1969), pp. 608-9. In this and other respects the proposition that Joyce's 'dislike of the Irish language and everything associated with it was pathological' by David Greene, 'Michael Cusack' in C.C. O'Brien (ed.), *The Shaping of Modern Ireland* (London, 1960), p. 77 is wide of the mark.

50 *Independent on Sunday*, 15 January 1995.



There were at least 3000 inmates still just alive. They were all starving, and skeletons to look at. The irony of the whole thing was that outside the wire lay the most fertile parts of the German Rhineland, with fields of potatoes and green vegetables of every kind. Inside the wire the only thing there was to eat was a pile of rotting potatoes.

My two hours were up and I had to go and rejoin the 29th armoured brigade. That was the last I saw of Belsen.

Many writers who survived locations like the foregoing have left accounts of their experiences from within, Primo Levi, Simone Weil, Elie Wiesel. There is a measure of overlap between their descriptions and the Gaelic records considered here, however fragmentary the latter may seem.<sup>51</sup> Discussion of the Irish language and its civilisation from the second half of the nineteenth century usually emphasises their demise. The time-honoured comparison with Jewish tradition may again be *à propos*. Neither culture departed in unbroken silence.

51 It should be noted that a third type of evidence also exists in the Irish language concerning the Great Famine, namely Revival literature which uses the event as a source of inspiration in the same way as Patrick Kavanagh did in English with reference to the intellectual and spiritual impoverishment of his own time. See for instance the short story entitled 'Gorta' ['Famine'] in Máirtín Ó Cadhain, *An tSraith ar Lár* (Second impression, Dublin, 1970), pp. 27-31. This great twentieth-century Gaelic prose stylist's work is replete with explorations of distress and decline (material, social and psychological) which may perhaps be described as post-Famine in their resonances.