Asenath Nicholson’s record of ‘The Famine of 1847, ’48 and ’49’, first published in 1850 as the third part of her study of Irish history entitled Lights and Shades of Ireland, is one of a large number of eye-witness accounts from the period. These descriptive and individualised narratives by contemporary observers such as Nicholas Cummins, William Bennett, William Forster and Sydney Osborne constitute a significant but frequently neglected historical source. The omission or scant reference to these writings in Famine historiography suggests a fear, on the part of some historians, of their emotive potential along with a suspicion that they do not constitute a sufficiently objective source. In those histories where eye-witness accounts are mentioned, they frequently serve as a type of shorthand for famine’s effects, given in isolation from other aspects of the Famine study and without any detailed analysis of their original context, audience or reception. Substantial work is yet to be done on the nature and influence of observers’ accounts, in relation both to the original context in which they appeared and the occasions in which they have been reproduced, albeit infrequent. The texts of these accounts themselves deserve a close examination, moving beyond questions of putative accuracy to the type of detail chosen for representation, the existence of recurring motifs, the role of the observer and the creation of a famine spectacle. Drawing from cinematic theories of ‘gaze’ and ‘spectacle’, this article presents a re-reading or re-visioning of Asenath Nicholson’s famine account; re-vision, in the words of Adrienne Rich, being ‘the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction.’

Contemporary film criticism, in particular the work of feminist film theorists, provides a richly suggestive perspective from which to view the writings of Nicholson and others. In a pioneering article, entitled ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’ and published in 1975, Laura Mulvey argued that mainstream cinema invites the spectator to identify with a male gaze which objectifies the female; woman is thus the object of the gaze, ‘to-be-looked-at-ness’. Mulvey’s identification of ‘woman as image, man as bearer of the look’ is exemplified

throughout representations of famine, in which individual victims are characterised most frequently as female, by predominantly male observers. Developing Mulvey's work, some film critics have investigated the nature of a female gaze and the positioning of a female spectator: what happens when a woman looks? In exploring these questions, feminist film theory faces many of the problems and dangers encountered by feminist literary studies: defining the realm of the female may involve positing a female specificity, woman as nature, as mother, which reproduces and reinforces the old dualisms of culture and nature. Female perspectives also risk becoming an unchallengeable 'authentic' expression. With reference to this particular study of Nicholson's famine text, the danger is of positing a 'pure female gaze'.

The writings of Judith Mayne and Christine Gledhill, two more recent theorists, resonate in interesting ways with Nicholson's narrative. In arguing that film theory's over-concentration on the psycho-linguistic has neglected social, economic and political practices, Gledhill's work parallels the move by other feminist writers from the 'textual' to the 'social' subject. Her work is of particular interest in studying famine texts, both in its emphasis on the importance of social and economic formations and in its identification of 'textual negotiation'. Gledhill defines the dynamics of a text and of its reception as processes of negotiation in which 'meaning arises out of a struggle or negotiation between competing frames of reference, motivation and experience'; the critic is thus one who analyses 'the conditions and possibilities of reading', who 'opens up the negotiations of the text in order to animate the contradictions in play'.

Drawing from analysis of the novel, Judith Mayne similarly defines narrative as a 'form of negotiation', in this case between the private and the public spheres, with female writing in novels and in cinema involving an 'intensification' of such negotiations. As a summary of women's relationship to the cinema, Mayne has formulated the expressive phrase, 'the woman at the keyhole':

On one side of the corridor is a woman who peeks, on the other, the woman who is, as it were, on display ... The history of women's relat-

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3 See Linda Williams, 'When the Woman Looks' in M.A. Doane, P. Mellencamp and L. Williams (eds), Re-Vision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism (Maryland/ Los Angeles, 1984); Lorraine Gamman and Margaret Marshment, The Female Gaze (London, 1988) and E.A. Kaplan, Women and Film: Both Sides of the Camera (London, 1983).
5 Gledhill, 'Pleasurable Negotiations', pp. 68, 74-5.
tionship to the cinema, from this side of the keyhole, has been a series of tentative peeks; that threshold ... crossed with difficulty.  

The key-hole and threshold mark the boundary between public and private spheres, between outside and inside; rooms and homes being viewed traditionally as women's space. Drawing on the work of women film-makers, Mayne contemplates what happens 'if women cast a cinematic gaze inside rooms': the construction of narrative space from a female perspective. Nicholson's famine writing, read in light of these studies, demonstrates the operations of a female gaze, its specific negotiations and thresholds 'crossed with difficulty'.

Asenath Hatch Nicholson was born in Vermont in the late eighteenth century, where she worked as a teacher, before moving to New York in the 1830s. A strict teetotaller and vegetarian, and follower of Sylvester Graham, a Presbyterian minister, she opened the Graham Temperance Boarding-house in New York, later described as 'the resort of hundreds of choice spirits from all parts of the country, including most of the names of those who were engaged in measures of social reform.' Nicholson first arrived in Ireland in June 1844; her book, *Ireland's Welcome to the Stranger; or, Excursions through Ireland in 1844, and 1845*, first published in 1847, records her travels around Ireland, staying in lodging-houses and in cabins, including the homes of servant-girls whom Nicholson had employed in New York. As well as 'personally investigating the condition of the poor' Nicholson sought to distribute and read the Bible among the Irish, having obtained a stock of Bibles, some in English and some in Irish, from the Hibernian Bible Society. Nicholson's independence of spirit and her ability to disturb and perplex her contemporaries are clear from the memorable editorial published in the *Achill Herald* of June 1845:

She lodges with the peasantry, and alleges that her object is to become acquainted with Irish character. This stranger is evidently a person of some talent, and although the singular course which she pursues is utterly at variance with the modesty and retiredness to which the Bible gives a prominent place in its delineation of a virtuous female, she professes to have no ordinary regard for that Holy Book ... It appears to us that the principal object of this woman's mission is to create a spirit of discontent among the lower orders and to dispose them to regard their

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7 Ibid., pp. 54-5.
8 Ibid., p. 55.
10 Asenath Nicholson, *Ireland's Welcome to the Stranger; or, Excursions through Ireland in 1844, and 1845, for the Purpose of Personally Investigating the Condition of the Poor* (London, 1847).
superiors as so many unfeeling oppressors ... There is nothing either in
her conduct or conversation to justify the supposition of insanity, and we
strongly suspect that she is the emissary of some democratic or revolu-
tionary society.11

Nicholson’s particular denominational affiliation remains unclear; Alfred
Sheppard, author of the preface to the 1926 reprint of Ireland’s Welcome, notes
that nowhere does Nicholson give a clue to her own denomination, ‘if indeed
it had any other member than herself’.12 Similarly, in Lights and Shades of Ireland,
Nicholson gives a detailed account of the various denominations existing in
Ireland such as Presbyterians, the Society of Friends, Methodists and others, and
describes herself as ‘a listener who belongs to no one of them’.13

Returning to Ireland in late 1846, Nicholson spent the next two years trav-
elling around famine-stricken areas: based in Dublin for six months, she moved
in July 1847 to the north of Ireland, visiting Belfast, Donegal, Derry, Arranmore;
the autumn of 1847 and winter 1847-8 she spent in the west, including Tuam,
Ballina, Achill Island; in summer and autumn 1848 she visited Munster, before
leaving Ireland in late 1848 or early 1849. Nicholson’s account of what she had
seen, entitled ‘The Famine of 1847, ’48 and ’49’, was first published in London
in 1850, along with her accounts of early Irish history and of ‘saints, kings, and
poets, of the early ages’. In April 1851, the famine account was published in
New York as a separate volume; a ‘tale of woe’ which, according to its editor
‘J.L.’, ‘should be read by the whole American people; it will have a salutary
effect upon their minds, to appreciate more fully the depth of oppression and
wretchedness from which the Irish poor escape in coming to this land of plenty.’

Both Nicholson’s commentaries and the author herself emphasise the breadth
and depth of her investigation, entering people’s homes, in city and countrys-
side: ‘walking and riding, with money and without, in castle and cabin, in bog
and in glen, by land and by water, in church and in chapel, with rector, curate
and priest.’14 In the preface to Lights and Shades the author warns the reader of
the horrors, the ‘fearful realities’ which she has witnessed, and stresses the uniqueness
of her perspective:

The reader of these pages should be told that, if strange things are re-
corded, it was because strange things were seen; and if strange things

version of Ireland’s Welcome; London, 1926).
14 J. L., ‘Introduction’ in Asenath Nicholson, Annals of the Famine in Ireland, in 1847, 1848,
and 1849 (New York, 1851).
15 Nicholson, Lights and Shades of Ireland, p. 438.
were seen which no other writer has written, it was because no other writer has visited the same places, under the same circumstances. No other writer ever explored mountain and glen for four years, with the same object in view; ... And now, while looking at them calmly at a distance, they appear, even to myself, more like a dream than reality, because they appear out of common course, and out of the order of even nature itself. But they are realities, and many of them fearful ones — realities which none but eye-witnesses can understand, and none but those who passed through them can feel.

The distinctive nature of her position is attributed both to her identity as woman: 'My task was a different one — operating individually. I took my own time and way — as woman is wont to do, when at her own option' 16, and as 'foreigner':

I was attached to England as the race from which I descended, and pitied Ireland for her sufferings, rather than I admired her for any virtues which she might possess; consequently my mind was so balanced between the two, that on which side the scale might have preponderated, the danger of blind partiality would not have been so great. 17

Later Nicholson identifies a bias to which she, as female outsider, is distinctively vulnerable: 'the danger of that excessive pity or blind fondness, which a kind mother feels for a deformed or half-idiot child, which all the world, if not the father himself, sets aside as a thing of nought.' 18

Nicholson’s famine narrative includes a number of striking individualised accounts, offered almost reluctantly and quite apologetically, as 'specimens, not wishing to be tedious with such narrations, only to show the character of the famine, and its effects in general on the sufferers, with whom I was conversant.' 19 Two of the most memorable descriptions of famine victims occur quite early in the narrative, while Nicholson is still in Dublin, and provide interesting examples of Nicholson’s singular 'negotiations', with regard to her own position and her encounters with others.

Nicholson’s first sight of ‘a starving person’ occurs in Kingstown/Dun Laoghaire:

A servant in the house where I was stopping, at Kingstown, said that the milk woman wished me to see a man near by, that was in a state of actual starvation; and he was going out to attempt to work on the Queen’s highway; a little labour was beginning outside the house, and fifteen-

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16 Ibid., p. 229. 
17 Ibid., pp. 8–9. 
18 Ibid., p. 10. 
19 Ibid., p. 233.
pence-a-day stimulated this poor man, who had seven to support, his rent to pay, and fuel to buy.  

The description of her encounter with the starving man is prefaced by an apostrophe to the reader:

and reader, if you never have seen a starving being, may you never! In my childhood I had been frightened with the stories of ghosts, and had seen actual skeletons; but imagination had come short of the sight of this man...[he] was emaciated to the last degree; he was tall, his eyes prominent, his skin shrivelled, his manner cringing and childlike; and the impression then and there made never has nor ever can be effaced.

Nicholson's observations contain motifs common to other eye-witness accounts: the physical description of the man, the sense of a reality exceeding the possibilities of imagination. Much less frequent is her explicit inclusion of political and economic analysis, in this case a ringing condemnation of official methods of payment: 'Workmen are not paid at night on the public works, they must wait a week; and if they commence labour in a state of hunger, they often die before the week expires.' In contrast to many other eye-witness accounts in which encountering and distributing famine relief requires male authorization and mediation, frequently from local ministers, priests or doctors, Nicholson's distribution of food occurs during the family's absence, with help provided by the servant. References to entrances and gates, which carry crucial material consequences, permeate Nicholson's narrative: the labourers are 'called in' to the kitchen for food while others are fed at the door; the eventual locking of the gate, the barring of access, painfully signifies the exhaustion of supplies; while an unexpected donation from New York allows the unlocking of the gate, once the 'man of the house' has left for his business in Dublin.

Soon after this episode, Nicholson details another encounter, on this occasion with a widow who she meets 'creeping upon the street, one cold night', carrying 'a few boxes of matches, to see if she could sell them, for she told me she could not yet bring herself to beg; she could work, and was willing to, could she get knitting or sewing.' The woman is reluctant to give Nicholson the number of her home; having given an indirect promise to call some future day and meaning to take the woman 'by surprise', Nicholson recounts that 'at ten the next morning my way was made into that fearful street, and still more
fearful alley, which led to the cheerless abode I entered.' Her journey through the city's 'retired streets and dark alleys' involves 'finding my way through darkness and filth' until 'a sight opened upon me, which, speaking moderately was startling.' The description of this sight, as Nicholson's gaze travels around the room, from the dark corner at her right to the other side of the empty grate, includes features common to other famine accounts: the empty fire, the woman without a dress, pawned to pay rent, the man without a coat 'likewise pawned', and Nicholson's initial muteness at the sight. Less frequent is the breaking of the pause by the widow Nicholson had encountered earlier; very rarely in such accounts do the suffering victims speak. In this case, a conversation takes place, one of the women is named, and, even rarer, the encounter emerges as the first of many such visits: ‘daily did I go and cook their food, or see it cooked.’

Nicholson's repeated crossing of the threshold of this 'forbidding', 'uncomfortable' and 'wretched' abode occurs in marked contrast to many other eyewitness accounts in which the beholder remains standing at the threshold or outside. The following extract from the Earl of Dufferin's account of his one-day visit to Skibbereen in 1847 is typical in its positioning of the male spectator:

Conversing on these subjects, we reached a most miserable portion of the town; the houses were mere hovels, dark and dismal in the inside, damp and filthy to the most offensive degree. So universal and virulent was the fever, that we were forced to choose among several houses to discover one or more which it would be safe to enter. At length, Mr Townsend singled out one. We stood on the threshold and looked in; the darkness of the interior was such, that we were scarcely able to distinguish objects; the walls were bare, the floor of mud, and not a vestige of furniture.

The perspectives offered by Dufferin and other contemporary observers further exemplify Laura Mulvey's comments on the gendered split between spectacle and narrative: women, or famine victims, represent 'icon' or 'spectacle' while the male protagonist 'articulates the look and creates the action.' In Nicholson's narrative, however, both the female protagonist/narrator and the women she observes possess an active role. Most rarely, Nicholson's entrance into the people's home and her giving of food are reciprocated: ‘Often late in the evening would I hear a soft footstep on the stairs, followed by a gentle tap, and the unassuming Mary would enter with her bountiful supply of fire kindling.’

23 Ibid., pp. 231-2.
addition, as part of a continued emphasis throughout her narrative on women's desire and duty to work, Mary and her friend are presented as 'good expert knitters and good sempstresses' who repair Nicholson's clothing.

The account of the 1840s famine provided in *Lights and Shades of Ireland* is also distinguished by its interweaving of detailed analysis of famine's causation with representation of famine's effects. Nicholson engages directly and vehemently with contemporary views such as the attribution of famine to God's providence: 'God is slandered, where it is called an unavoidable dispensation of His wise providence, to which we should all humbly bow, as a chastisement which could not be avoided'.

Her comments on the availability of food provide an early treatment of what has become one of the most controversial issues in famine history: the question of the existence of 'sufficient' food in Ireland; while they also anticipate late twentieth-century debates as to the relation between famine and entitlement to food:

and never was a famine on earth, in any part, when there was not an abundance in some part, to make up all the deficiency; ... Yes, unhesitatingly may it be said, that there was not a week during that famine, but there was sufficient food for the wants of that week, and more than sufficient.

Nicholson also castigates the government systems charged with transportation and distribution of grain, her strong individual grievance being the wasting of grain on the making of alcohol, while she deems many government officials or 'hirelings' guilty of crimes ranging from unnecessary delay in distribution of relief to direct embezzlement of government funds. Arguing that if the 'immediate breaking forth' of famine 'could not have been foreseen or prevented, its sad effects might have been met without the loss of life', she concludes, in a bitter satire of political economy, that 'the principle of throwing away life to-day, lest means to protect it to-morrow might be lessened, was fully and practically carried on and carried out.'

On a number of occasions in her narrative, Nicholson draws analogies between the position of American slaves and the Irish lower-classes: 'never had I seen slaves so degraded ... These poor creatures are in as virtual bondage to their landlords and superiors as is possible for mind and body to be.' In a passage strikingly prophetic of studies on the origins and ambivalences of colonial discourse, she declares that existing laws

27 Ibid., p. 237.
29 Ibid., p. 239.
30 Ibid., p. 301.
31 See, for example, Homi Bhabha, 'The Other Question: The Stereotype and Colonial Discourse' in *Screen* xxiv, 6 (1983), pp. 18-36.
possess the unvarying principle of fixing deeply and firmly in the heart of
the oppressor a hatred towards the very being that he has unjustly coerced,
and the very degradation to which he has reduced him becomes
the very cause of his aversion towards him.\textsuperscript{32}

Along with her detailing of encounters with individual famine victims and
her forceful political analysis of ‘oppression’, Nicholson stresses that her ‘great-
est object in writing this sketch of the famine’ was ‘to show its effects on all
classes, rather than to detail scenes of death by starvation.’\textsuperscript{33} Yet the distinctive
quality both of Nicholson and of her writings arises from her extensive visits
among the lower classes of Irish society. This ‘looking into’ the lives of the
poor, ironically, at first facilitated Nicholson’s entrance into upper-class society:

The people of Dublin, among the comfortable classes, whatever hospi-
tality they might manifest towards guests and visitors, had never troubled
themselves by looking into the real home wants of the suffering poor.
Enough they thought that societies of all kinds abounded, and a poor-
house besides, were claims upon their purses to a full equivalent for all
their consciences required, and to visit them was quite un-lady-like, if not
dangerous. To many of those I had access as a matter of curiosity, to hear
from me the tales of starvation, which they were now to have dealt out
unsparingly; and so kind were the most of them that the interview gen-
erally ended by an invitation to eat, which was never refused when needed,
and the meal thus saved was always given to the hungry.\textsuperscript{34}

Nicholson’s account affords to the ‘comfortable classes’ a certain voyeuristic
pleasure, ‘the impression of looking in on a private world unaware of the spec-
tator’s own existence’,\textsuperscript{35} a curiosity, even voyeurism, shared by future audi-
ences.

These visits, however, were to render the American ‘foreigner’ increasingly
suspicous to her contemporaries. Nicholson herself mimics the voices of her
critics, such as the ‘nominal professor’: “We do not understand your object,
and do you go into the miserable cabins among the lower order”.\textsuperscript{36} Although,
in the early part of her famine narrative, Nicholson comments that the events of
1846 onwards allowed easier and more frequent access for outsiders, ‘Poverty
was divested of every mask; and from the mud cabin to the estated gentleman’s
abode, all strangers who wished, without the usual circuitous ceremony, could

\textsuperscript{32} Nicholson, \textit{Lights and Shades of Ireland}, p. 408.
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., p. 25.
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., p. 234.
\textsuperscript{35} Williams, ‘When the Woman Looks’, p. 83.
\textsuperscript{36} Nicholson, \textit{Lights and Shades of Ireland}, p. 429.
gain access,' the later chapters suggest that her visits into Irish homes, particularly the homes of the poor, were made increasingly difficult by famine. *Ireland's Welcome to the Stranger*, Nicholson's earlier work, includes many accounts of staying overnight in cabins, with detailed descriptions of cabin interiors and bedding arrangements; significantly fewer of these are to be found in her famine work. On a number of occasions, Nicholson admits her reluctance to enter cabins: of her visit to Arranmore, Co. Donegal, she writes: 'We went from cabin to cabin till I begged the curate to show me no more.' On these occasions, Nicholson's famine discourse displays a marked struggle between competing judgements, sometimes bordering on animalistic terms and struggling to retain a humanised discourse:

they stood up before us in a speechless, vacant, staring, stupid, yet most eloquent posture, mutely graphically saying, 'Here we are, your bone and your flesh, made in God's image like you. Look at us! What brought us here?' ... when we entered they saluted us by crawling on all fours towards us, and trying to give some token of welcome.\(^3\)

In some of the most moving scenes in Nicholson's 'sketch' of famine, those seeking relief press against windows and doors, the threshold between the woman observer and famine victims now increasingly difficult to cross. In the home of the Hewitson family in Derry, 'the lower window-frame in the kitchen was of board instead of glass, this all having been broken by the pressure of faces continually there';\(^4\) at Newport,

the door and window of the kind Mrs Arthur wore a spectacle of distress indescribable; naked, cold and dying, standing like petrified statues at the window, or imploring, for God's sake, a little food, till I almost wished that I might flee into the wilderness, far, far from the abode of any living creature.\(^4\)

Soon afterwards, Nicholson is at dinner with a company of ministers during which she criticises their luxurious fare, in particular their taking of alcohol, citing the suffering of the people; the Marriage of Cana is cited in reply,

when in an hour after dinner the tea was served, as is the custom in Ireland, one of the daughters of the family passing a window, looked down upon the pavement and saw a corpse with a blanket spread over it, lying upon the walk beneath the window. It was a mother and infant,

\(^3\) Ibid., p. 246.  
\(^4\) Ibid., p. 256.  
\(^38\) Ibid., p. 271.  
\(^41\) Ibid., p. 284. 
\(^39\) Ibid.  
\(^42\) Ibid., p. 294.
dead, and a daughter of 16 had brought and laid her there, hoping to induce the people to put her in a coffin; and as if she had been listening to the conversation at the dinner of the want of coffins, she had placed her mother under the very window and eye, where those wine-bibing ministers might apply the lesson. All was hushed, the blinds were down, and a few sixpences were quite unostentatiously sent out to the poor girl, as a beginning, to procure a coffin. The lesson ended here.43

The episode is an interesting one for a number of reasons; clearly displayed, along with Nicholson’s strong objections to alcohol, are her alienation from most of the company inside, her imaginative sympathy with the girl outside which extends to some knowledge of the girl’s age and purpose, and her recognition of the desperate efforts of the poor to ensure a proper burial for their dead.

By early 1847, during her travels in Connaught, the overwhelming nature of what Nicholson has witnessed becomes clear:

A cabin was seen closed one day a little out of the town, when a man had the curiosity to open it, and in a dark corner he found a family of the father, mother, and two children, lying in close compact. The father was considerably decomposed; the mother, it appeared, had died last, and probably fastened the door, which was always the custom when all hope was extinguished, to get into the darkest corner and die, where passers-by could not see them. Such family scenes were quite common, and the cabin was generally pulled down upon them for a grave. The man called, begging me to look in. I did not, and could not endure, as the famine progressed, such sights, as well as at the first, they were too real, and these realities became a dread. In all my former walks over the island, by day or night, no shrinking or fear of danger ever retarded in the least my progress; but now, the horror of meeting living walking ghosts, or stumbling upon the dead in my path at night, inclined me to keep within when necessity did not call.43

In what are now familiar terms in Nicholson’s writing, the horror of the family’s death is expressed in terms of ‘inside’ and ‘outside’, of uncrossed thresholds: the mother fastens the door so that others may not enter, Nicholson is, by now, unable to even ‘look in’ and, in stark contrast to her earlier ‘excursions’, increasingly stays ‘within’.

In August 1848, in a letter published in the Cork Examiner, William O’Connor wrote, with regard to Asenath Nicholson:

43 Ibid., p. 330.
It is a singular spectacle to witness – a lady gently nurtured and brought up, giving up, for a time, home and country and kindred – visiting a land stricken with famine – traversing on foot that land from boundary to boundary, making her way over solitary mountains and treading through remote glens, where scarcely the steps of civilisation have reached, sharing the scanty potato of the poor but hospitable people, and lying down after a day of toil, in the miserable but secure cabin of a Kerry or Connaught peasant.44

Nicholson’s writings present, in many ways, a ‘singular spectacle’, both in the details of famine conditions and in the character of their observer. Her account illustrates the negotiations which she attempted, both personally – across geographical and class divisions, and in the narration of famine – between analysis of famine’s effects and causation; it remains a significant testimony to the ‘fearful realities’ of the 1840s famine.