

'Fearful Realities': An Introduction

CHRIS MORASH & RICHARD HAYES

The reader of these pages should be told that, if strange things are recorded, it was because strange things were seen; ... 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*.¹

It may well be no coincidence that two of the more respected and widely-read modern studies of the Irish Famine – R.D. Edwards and T.D. Williams's *The Great Famine* and Cathal Póirtéir's *The Great Irish Famine* – are interdisciplinary collections of essays. There is something about the Famine which seems to invoke what might almost be called a humility in historians, an unwillingness to venture into one of the largest and darkest areas of Irish history without a strong complement of colleagues bearing an arsenal of varied disciplinary weapons. 'Fearful' is probably the wrong word here, even if it was the word used by one eyewitness of the period, the American traveller, Asenath Nicholson, when she wrote of the condition of Ireland in 1848 as a series of 'fearful realities'. 'The famine', she writes when recording what she calls 'the superstitions of the peasantry', 'changed their poetical romance into such fearful realities that no time was left to bestow on imagination'.²

The two words which recur in Nicholson's work from the late 1840s and early 1850s – 'realities' and 'imagination' – and the third term which disrupts them – 'fearful' – anticipate in many ways the focus of debate which emerged at a conference dealing with the Famine held a century and a half later. In July of 1994, the Society for the Study of Nineteenth-Century Ireland's conference on the Famine brought together at St Patrick's College, Maynooth an archeologist, a medical historian, literary and cultural critics, a church historian, as well as historians with interests in population change, class allegiances, and relief administration.

For some of the scholars at this conference, particularly those we have included in the opening section entitled 'Realities: Responses and Implications',

1 Asenath Nicholson, *Lights and Shades of Ireland* (New York, 1851), v. iii, p. 229.

2 Nicholson, *Lights and Shades*, v. iii, p. 427.

the Famine is a presence to be invoked, conjured into existence as a physical, tangible reality. In the opening essay, Matthew Stout examines the realities of depopulation and consolidation in the Smith estate in Baltyboys, county Wicklow, through a combination of statistical sources and an eyewitness account – the diaries of Elizabeth Smith, the wife of the landlord of the estate. Following Stout's essay, Donald Jordan considers the demographic and economic changes which occurred during and after the Famine in county Mayo. In spite of the fact that both these papers deal with different parts of the country, however, they do reach similar conclusions: that, at the expense of small farmers, large grazier farmers were among those to benefit from the Famine.

The next essay in the section, by Laurence Geary of the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland, begins where perhaps any study of the Famine should begin: with the body. As well as drawing attention to the variety and malignity of diseases which appeared as 'famine's shadow' during the Great Famine, his essay gives an account of what in one sense were the most real responses to the suffering, those of medical institutions to the disease and the hunger.

The 'Realities' section moves to a close with an essay by James S. Donnelly, Jr., which opens up the question of interpretation. Where earlier papers in this section address themselves to those aspects of the Famine which can be measured – incidence of disease, changes in landholding, mechanisms of relief – Donnelly examines the ways in which we can ascribe meaning to these factual realities. The final paper in the section moves the question of establishing the physical reality of the Famine into a new arena, as Charles Orser, Jr., one of the pioneers in the field of slave archeology in the United States, poses the question: 'can there be an archeology of the Great Famine?'. In his account of his preliminary excavations on the Strokestown estate in County Roscommon, the answer would appear to be 'yes'. While some of the earlier essays in the collection, particularly Matthew Stout's work on the Baltyboys estate in County Wicklow, locate traces of the past in the landscape in ways which recall, for instance, the work of Kevin Whelan, Orser digs more deeply into the soil to unearth those physical objects whose tangible physicality brings the reality of the Famine into our own age.

Orser's move beyond the written word brings us into the territory marked out by the second section, 'Representations'. While none of the literary, cultural or theological historians and critics in this section would deny the physical reality of the Famine, many of them are troubled by its elusiveness while simultaneously attesting to the wide range of relatively unknown written representations which do exist. Neil Buttimer's pioneering work on the Famine in Gaelic manuscripts, for instance, alerts English-language readers for the first time to the wealth of Irish-language material on the Famine which remains unpublished, concluding that the Gaelic culture which the Famine did so much to destroy 'did not depart in unbroken silence'. Other essays in this section make reference

to a comparably wide range of materials, from poems to novels to travel narratives to newspapers to political pamphlets and religious tracts. Nonetheless, many of these critics share a common late twentieth-century concern that the relationship between representation and the reality it replaces is far from direct or simply. 'We can't take language, even the language of journalism, at "face value";' Sean Ryder reminds us in his essay, 'since "obvious meanings" and "face values" are not immutable.' 'The point is,' he indicates, 'we can't assess discourse and representation apart from its material contexts'. Indeed, Tom Boylan and Timothy Foley's reading of the discourse of political economy as it was applied to the Famine demonstrates all too clearly that the relationship between what we are calling 'Realities' and 'Representations' is an active one, which can be compared to that 'circular relation' which Michel Foucault discerns linking 'truth' 'with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extends it'.³

In this respect, the essays in the second half of the book depend upon the material contexts established by the writers in the first half, just as the material in the 'Realities' section is problematised and challenged by that which follows it. Chris Morash's essay, for instance, takes certain images whose origin is in the physical, bodily suffering which Laurence Geary's essay recounts in the opening pages, and traces their genealogy as forms of language whose claims to truth ultimately become self-contained, referring primarily to other representations rather than to a prior physical reality. Similarly, Margaret Kelleher's study of the 'female gaze' reminds us of the ways in which any form of representation is necessarily gender inflected; we may think we are seeing things 'as they are', but, as feminist theory reminds us, our ways of seeing are never completely neutral. Who we are determines what we see as much as what we happen to be looking at. Nor is this identification of the Famine as a site of controversy and discursive jousting a recent phenomena, as Robert Mahony's essay on John Mitchel's influential writing of the Famine points out, demonstrating the ways in which the residue of earlier attempts to inscribe the Famine in a meaningful historical context continue to have an afterlife which outlives their political usefulness. Indeed, this is also the basic point of the collection's final essay, in which the Revd Robert Dunlop attempts to redress the Famine's continuing bitter sectarian aftertaste.

It well may be objected that there is something just a bit too tidy, too binary in the arrangement of these essays into the neatly opposed categories of 'Realities' and 'Representations'. If that is so, it is because there is a missing third term, a ghostly Other which haunts these pages, something which 'seemed more like a dream than reality' to Asenath Nicholson in the late 1840s. This third, 'fearful'

3 Michel Foucault, 'Truth and Power' in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York, 1984), p. 74

element, might be named as the Famine dead, whose numbers and suffering was, for Nicholson and so many others of the period, 'out of the order of even nature itself'. Essays such as those which follow attempt to weave a net of discourses, practices, words, and artifacts which will define just what that 'order of nature' was perceived to have been by those who experienced that which we so inadequately call 'the Famine'. It is neither to romanticise nor to mystify the Famine, however, to claim that the meaning of suffering and death on the scale which occurred during those years slips through our nets, no matter how carefully woven. On the contrary, to assert that such suffering has a reality, even if it resists both empirical analysis and representation – 'perhaps more than any other human experience'⁴ – is to identify that point at which the scholarly enterprise becomes a moral imperative. To admit the full adequacy of any analysis or representation of the Famine would be to perform an act of closure which is analogous to forgetting insofar as it consigns the past to the past. Instead, suspended in the 'fearful' position of proclaiming the reality of the Famine while simultaneously problematising its representation, we perform that act which T.W. Adorno urges in 'Commitment', a secularising of Pascal's 'theological saying, *On ne doit plus dormir.*' 'The abundance of real suffering', Adorno writes, 'tolerates no forgetting.'⁵ So too in their combined attempts to keep both the reality and the representation of the Famine before us, do the contributors to this volume challenge us to tolerate no forgetting.

4 Elaine Scarry, *Resisting Representation* (Oxford, 1994), p. 20.

5 T.W. Adorno, 'Commitment' in *The Frankfurt School Reader* (New York, 1982), p. 312.