

'Something so utterly unprecedented in the annals of human life': William Carleton and the Famine

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The Ulsterman William Carleton was perhaps best placed to describe Victoria's Ireland, because he interacted with all of its elements, and in a sense created it – certainly for those who outlived his 'transition time'. In spite of the fact that he was derided by many nationalists for his conversion to Protestantism, the memorial attached to his application for a state pension in 1847 bears eloquent witness to the admiration he nevertheless inspired in all sections of the community. As Norman Vance writes:

Carleton in a sense united his country: the list of eminent persons who petitioned the government to grant him a pension in 1847 represents all the different ways of being Irish. Nothing else could have brought together the President of the Catholic College at Maynooth and Colonel Blacker, the Orange leader, in the presence of Maria Edgeworth, Dan O'Connell's son, Oscar Wilde's father and Rev. Dr. Henry Cooke from Belfast.¹

Or, as Thomas Flanagan placed it more sensationally in the context of the forthcoming Young Ireland insurrection, Carleton was supported by 'men who were soon to be accused of treason, some of the witnesses against them, the lawyers who prosecuted, and the judges who sentenced them to death.'² But perhaps the greatest proof of his role as the historian and prophet of nineteenth-century Ireland is his representation of Victoria's Ireland as Famine Ireland. The prevalence of famine in Carleton's writing suggests the immediacy of experience; he writes not with the detached guilt and horror of the outsider, like Anthony Trollope or Sidney Godolphin Osborne, or indeed with the bewildered outrage of Irish metropolitan observers such as Charles Gavan Duffy and John Mitchel, but as one who has witnessed famine at first hand, if not suffered himself. The lavish spreads in Carleton's stories, such as 'Shane Fadh's Wedding', 'The Station' and 'Going to Maynooth', have a fetishistic feel to them, and Carleton's earliest memory was of being carried by his mother to a wedding or feast, where there

¹ Norman Vance, *Irish Literature: A Social History: Tradition, Identity and Difference* (Oxford, 1990), p. 137. ² Thomas Flanagan, *The Irish Novelists, 1800–1850* (New York, 1959), p. 323.

were tables groaning with food; he adds, poignantly: 'I suppose the depth of the impression was occasioned by the novelty of what I saw.'³

Famine is pervasive in Carleton's fiction: the decision not to become a priest in the semi-autobiographical 'The Lough Derg Pilgrim' is sparked by repugnance at the demands of money for confession by priests during the 1817 famine; 'Tubber Derg' and 'The Poor Scholar' are unconcealed attacks on Irish landlords, whom Carleton blamed for the severity of the famine of 1817; and *Valentine M'Clutchy*, published in 1845 but set in 1804, scourges agents, landlords and evangelical clergymen who exploit famine for their own ends. While Carleton's primary aim is to show Irish character under duress, he is also touching upon the consequences of colonialism – absenteeism, exploitation, deprivation, starvation.

It is unsurprising that Carleton should be among the first Irish writers to reflect the Great Famine in his literature, as his work is grounded in the major events of early nineteenth-century Ireland – the tithe campaign, agrarian unrest, the temperance crusade, Orangeism, Ribbonism, emigration, land and famine. He presented himself as an historian, recording a society in transition and a dying race. He introduced his collection of stories, *Tales and Sketches*, as:

probably, something unparalleled in the annals of literature; for the author has reason to think that several of the originals, who sat for their portraits here presented, were the last of their class which the country will ever again produce[.]⁴

Written on 16 June 1845, on the very eve of the Great Famine, this prediction was to prove true more quickly than Carleton could have known. Although Carleton is now valued for his depictions of a lost pre-Famine world, his work is more representative of Famine Ireland – the Ireland of those who were vulnerable to almost annual crop failures. His chief interest (at least until after the Famine decimated them) was in the Irish peasantry – not the Big House or the Anglo-Irish or the Gaelic chieftains of famous contemporaries such as Maria Edgeworth and Sydney Owenson, but the precarious peasant world of bare subsistence. As Carleton stressed in *The Black Prophet: A Tale of Irish Famine*, famine was ever-present in so-called pre-Famine Ireland:

Much for instance is said, and has been said, concerning what are termed 'Years of Famine,' but it is not generally known, that since the introduction of the potato into this country, no year has ever passed which, in some remote locality or other, has not been such to the unfortunate inhabitants.⁵

3 D.J. O'Donoghue, *The Life and Writings of William Carleton* (2 vols, London, 1896), vol. 1, 4.

4 William Carleton, *Tales and Sketches Illustrating the Character, Usages, Traditions, Sports and Pastimes of the Irish Peasantry* (Dublin, 1845), p. viii. 5 William Carleton, *The Black Prophet: A*

Indeed, there had been fourteen partial potato failures in Ireland between 1816 and 1842.⁶ Famine was so integral to Irish malaise in the nineteenth century that it transcends the literal for Carleton, becoming a metaphor for cultural dearth and personal impoverishment. For example, in the 'General Introduction' to *Traits and Stories*, in 1842, Carleton compares the state of Irish literary production and publishing to a famine:

During some of the years of Irish famine, such were the unhappy circumstances of the country, that she was exporting provisions of every description in the most prodigal abundance, which the generosity of England was sending back again for our support. So was it with literature. Our men and women of genius uniformly carried their talents to the English market, whilst we laboured at home under all the dark privations of a literary famine.⁷

Metaphors of literary famine and absenteeism constitute a powerful vindication of Carleton's much-vaunted resolve to revive his country's industry by staying in Ireland and publishing there (though to an extent he had little choice in the matter). But there is a serious subversive point here also: it is fascinating to realize that three years before the onset of the Great Famine, Carleton is employing one of the key arguments of the nationalist mythos surrounding the Famine, and the mainstay of John Mitchel's argument about England's genocidal agenda: that England drained Ireland of provisions while Ireland starved. Astonishingly, the criticism occurs even earlier in Carleton's work. 'Phil Purcel, the Pig-Driver', which first appeared in *Traits and Stories* in 1833, sardonically attacks the practice of exporting to Britain while the Irish starve in a barely veiled threat:

But it is very condescending in John to eat our beef and mutton; and as he happens to want both, it is particularly disinterested in him to encourage us in the practice of self-denial. It is possible, however, that we may ultimately refuse to banquet by proxy on our own provisions; and that John may not be much longer troubled to eat for us in that capacity.⁸

'The Poor Scholar', also published in 1833, describes the immense amount of food leaving Ireland in exports: 'the very country thus groaning under such a terrible sweep of famine is actually pouring from all her ports a profusion of food, day after day; flinging it from her fertile bosom, with the wanton excess

Tale of Irish Famine (London and Belfast, 1847), p. 175. ⁶ R.F. Foster, *Modern Ireland, 1600-1972* (London, 1988), p. 320. ⁷ William Carleton, 'General Introduction', in *Traits and Stories of the Irish Peasantry* (3 vols, Dublin and London, 1841), vol. 1, v. ⁸ 'Phil Purcel', in *Traits and Stories*, vol. 1, 410.

of a prodigal oppressed by abundance.⁹ Carleton's revolutionary language long predates the militant language of Mitchel in a post-Famine and supposedly alien world.

Carleton has been criticized for not creating in *The Black Prophet* or other works a plot commensurate to the atrocity of the Great Famine. Malcolm Brown, like many others underestimating Carleton's intellect and overestimating his peasant status, believes that he was simply incapable of understanding its enormity: 'beyond communicating the raw feel of human pain, Carleton's peasant brain had trouble seizing the meaning of the catastrophe.'¹⁰ In fact, *The Black Prophet* was one of those curious prophetic quirks of Carleton's fiction, arising from the depth of social knowledge submerged in his works. The novel was first published in the *Dublin University Magazine* between May and December 1846; when it first began to appear, there had only been the partial blight of 1845, and no sign that the destruction would recur. Even when Carleton wrote his polemical 'Preface' to *The Black Prophet* in February 1847, he could foresee that there would be great hardship due to the unexpected second failure in 1846, and he knew from his own experience that disease would follow, but he could not have predicted the low yield of 1847, or the failure of 1848. It is for this reason – the fact that the Great Famine did not exist as a concept when Carleton began to write *The Black Prophet* – and not for any inability to comprehend the tragedy, that Carleton chose to use the Famine as a background to a murder mystery. Despite the well-intentioned but misguided defence of *The Black Prophet* by critics such as Sophia Hillan King, that one 'need not go to this novel for plot, but rather for its evocation of the realities of famine', this is not at all what Carleton intended.¹¹ The principal interest of the novel, he stresses in the same 'Introduction' in which he criticizes the government for failing to protect Ireland from famine, should not be 'so gloomy a topic as famine', but 'the workings of those passions and feelings which usually agitate human life, and constitute the character of those who act in it.'¹² *The Black Prophet* was in fact nothing less than a pre-emptive strike on the market.¹³ For Carleton, this was simply the latest in a long line of failures – a fact made clear by the non-specific subtitle, *A Tale of Irish Famine*. As far as he was concerned, this famine would soon be forgotten, and it would be a shame to let it pass without making some literary, political and financial capital from it: 'National inflictions of this kind pass away, and are soon forgotten by every one but those with whom they have left their melancholy memorials.'¹⁴ One hundred and fifty years later, Cormac Ó Gráda

⁹ 'The Poor Scholar', in *Traits and Stories*, vol. 2, 307. ¹⁰ Malcolm Brown, *The Politics of Irish Literature from Thomas Davis to W. B. Yeats* (London, 1972), p. 92. ¹¹ Sophia Hillan King, "'Pictures drawn from memory": William Carleton's experience of famine', *Irish Review*, 17/18 (Winter 1995), 80–9, p. 82. ¹² Carleton, *Black Prophet*, p. iv. ¹³ *Howitt's Journal*, 1:17 (24 April 1847), 236–7, p. 236; Barbara Hayley, *A Bibliography of the Writings of William Carleton* (Gerrards Cross, 1983), p. 149. ¹⁴ Carleton, *Black Prophet*, p. iv.

concur: 'Ironically, had the potato famine of 1845 lasted just one year, it would have merited no more than a few paragraphs in the history books.'¹⁵

But this famine did not pass away. In 1842, on the basis of his own exertions in periodicals and books, Carleton announced a new age of Irish literature. By 1848 that dream – and one million people – were dead. Carleton's first publisher, William Curry Jr., and seventy-two other Irish publishers, were declared bankrupt between 1844 and 1848, reflecting a wide-spread economic destruction brought on by the Famine.¹⁶ On a visit to London in 1850, Carleton found that *The Black Prophet* had achieved a wide and appreciative English audience. However, Carleton, like Trollope, was to discover that English readers had tired of gloomy Irish subjects. The London publisher Maxwell declined to publish a Carleton novel in 1850, telling him that 'the Irish are not able to buy it, and the English will not', and making the bizarre suggestion that the Irish national novelist should 'go to Lancashire, reside there, and devote his gifts to English subjects'.¹⁷ James Duffy, the notable survivor among Irish publishers, warned Carleton in 1855: 'The people seldom think of buying books, because they are luxuries, which they can do without.'¹⁸ Carleton's disillusionment with both Irish literature and Ireland itself can be traced in *The Squanders of Castle Squander*, published – significantly, given Carleton's criticism of literary exportation, in London – in 1852.

Based on 'a knowledge of more than fifty years of my people and the country', *Castle Squander* also charts the destruction of fifty years of Irish literature, beginning with an Edgeworthian comic framework, and ending with a literary nervous breakdown.¹⁹ The novel begins with the first-person narrative of Randy O'Rollick, the bailiff's son, one of the new breed of wily social climbers thriving in the ruins of feudal Ireland; Randy even mentions casually that bailiffs often make their sons attorneys in order to swindle their masters of their land – as Thady Quirk's son Jason had done in *Castle Rackrent*.²⁰ But as the narrative grows progressively darker, O'Rollick's narrative is usurped by authorial intrusions and extracts from the *Dublin University Magazine*, Charles Trevelyan's *The Irish Crisis*, letters by W.N. Hancock and J.S. Mill, references to Dante's *Inferno*, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Defoe's *The Great Plague*, and Carleton's own novel *Valentine M'Clutchy*. *The Black Prophet* had been mined from his own experience of the 1817 famine, but now, realising in hindsight that the Great Famine was utterly unprecedented in its horror and impact, and that he, as a member of the Dublin intelligentsia, had been spared its ravages, the Irish national novelist finds himself forced to rely on textual evidence.

15 Cormac Ó Gráda, *Ireland before and after the Famine: Explorations in Economic History, 1800–1925* (Manchester, 1988), p. 5. 16 Charles Benson, 'Printers and booksellers in Dublin 1800–1850', in Robin Myers and Michael Harris (eds), *Spreading the Word: the Distribution Networks of Print 1550–1850* (Winchester, 1990), pp. 47–59, p. 57. 17 O'Donoghue, *Life*, vol. 2, 176–7. 18 *Ibid.*, vol. 2, 215. 19 William Carleton, *The Squanders of Castle Squander* (2 vols, London, 1852), vol. 1, iii–iv. 20 *Ibid.*, vol. 1, 3–4.

Though bewildered by the Famine, Carleton was not confused about its cause and consequences. Like Anthony Trollope, he toys with the idea of the Famine as providential retribution. The starving in *The Black Prophet* are described as 'like creatures changed from their very humanity by some judicial plague that had been sent down from heaven to punish and desolate the land'.²¹ Carleton allows us to believe, along with the people of Glen Dhu, that the Daltons' decline and fall into poverty and then starvation and sickness is punishment for a murder committed by the head of the family twenty years before: 'it became too certain to be doubted, that the slow but sure finger of God's justice was laid upon them as an additional proof that crime, however it may escape the laws of men, cannot veil itself from the all-seeing eye of the Almighty.'²² In fact, old Dalton is innocent, and his decline is due to economic, social and political imperatives rather than supernatural agencies: the ruthless grasping of the middleman, who wants to evict the Daltons so as to profit by the £500 improvements they have made on their farm; their absentee landlord, who draws £32,000 a year from his estate, yet who contributed only £100 to the relief of his famine-stricken tenants;²³ and by implication the government, whom Carleton had criticized in the 'Dedication' for not legislating to prevent such disasters. Moreover, Providence is exposed as false currency in its use by the miser Darby Skinadre, who justifies his exploitation of his clients with providential theory: 'the thruth is, we have brought all these scourges on us by our sins and our thransgressions; thim that sins, Jemmy, must suffer.'²⁴ Such a doctrine in such a mouth must be discredited. As in Carleton's previous examinations of famine, fault lies not with a sinful people, but with a social chaos. However, things are different in *Castle Squander*; the enormity of the catastrophe disrupted not only his link to the authentic peasantry, but his hold on common sense. Carleton had begun *The Black Prophet* with an appeal to Lord John Russell to ameliorate the Famine and prevent it ever happening again; he ends *Castle Squander* with the assertion that the Famine 'came upon us, not from Lord John Russell, but directly from the hand of God'.²⁵

Castle Squander opens in a year of famine, and Randy witnesses the excesses of the Squanders' entertainments while their tenants starve. Masses of food lie about in the dust of the kitchen floor, the dogs are treated to bins of oatmeal and potatoes, and we are reminded:

Now it so happened, that the year in question was one of severe famine, and I could not help reflecting, even then, that the sum of five pounds, subscribed to the relief fund by Mr. Squander, took a very inhuman shape, when associated with the profuse abundance thus lavished in his kennel, whilst so many of his fellow creatures, nay, of his own tenants, were literally perishing for want of food.²⁶

21 Carleton, *Black Prophet*, pp. 176–7. 22 *Ibid.*, p. 99. 23 *Ibid.*, p. 198. 24 *Ibid.*, p. 53. 25 Carleton, *Castle Squander*, vol. 2, 391. 26 *Ibid.*, vol. 1, 44.

However, whereas in his previous works famine would have provided a catalyst exposing the Irish peasant character, here it simply highlights the immoral excesses of Irish landlords; but again there is a subversive undercurrent, as Squander's £5 donation is doubtless a sly reference to the (untrue) story that Queen Victoria had given only £5 to famine relief. There is an impassable gulf established between the Big House and the cabin, which Carleton does not attempt to breach. Once Randy is established at Castle Squander, his peasant family virtually disappears from view. This is of course partly dictated by the novel's overt parody of *Castle Rackrent*, but it is also Carleton's way of distancing himself from individual famine victims. In *Castle Squander*, the process of dehumanization begun in *The Black Prophet* intensifies. Carleton was an experienced writer of the macabre – one only has to read 'Wildgoose Lodge' to see that. He often refers to the Irish peasantry as 'Frankensteins',²⁷ and almost forty years before J.S. Le Fanu's 'Carmilla', and sixty-four years before Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, Carleton was describing ruthless agents as 'vampyres';²⁸ for example, in *The Black Prophet*, Sarah is described as a 'beautiful vampire that was ravening for the blood of its awakened victim'.²⁹ But nothing prepares us for the amount and intensity of horror in *Castle Squander*. On a visit to Squander's tomb, Mrs Squander, Emily and Tom seem to enter an Inferno, where rotting cholera victims are tossed into trenches, only to be dragged out by ravenous dogs:

Legs and arms stripped of the flesh and bearing about them the unnatural marks left by the bloody fangs of some hungry mastiff, were scattered about. Some had been dragged into the neighbouring fields, as might be learned by the eager and interrupted howl of the half-gratified animal, as he feasted upon the revolting meat. In a different field might be seen another wolfish hound, with a human head between his paws, on the features of which he was making his meal.

*Now, all these frightful pictures were facts of that day, and were witnessed by thousands!*³⁰

In *Red Hall, or The Baronet's Daughter*, published the same year, and with a similar Big House setting, the animals who eat putrid flesh are human beings, and with the final taboo, cannibalism, falls the myth of family solidarity in the face of famine:

all the impulses of nature and affection were not merely banished from the heart, but superseded by the most frightful peals of insane mirth, cru-

²⁷ For example, *Castle Squander*, vol. 2, 88. Carleton makes the common mistake of believing 'Frankenstein' was the monster, not its creator. ²⁸ 'Poor Scholar', in *Traits and Stories*, vol. 2, 332; William Carleton, *Valentine M'Clutchy, the Irish Agent; or, Chronicles of the Castle Cumber Property* (2 vols, Dublin, 1845), vol. 2, 175. ²⁹ Carleton, *Black Prophet*, p. 10. ³⁰ Carleton, *Castle Squander*, vol. 2, 139.

elty, and the horrible appetite of the ghoul and vampire. Some were found tearing the flesh from the bodies of the carcasses that were stretched beside them... fathers have been known to make a wolfish meal upon the dead bodies of their own offspring. We might, therefore, have carried on our description up to the very highest point of imaginable horror, without going beyond the truth.³¹

While famine offers the ultimate in artistic license for Gothic and realist authors, this is Carleton's nightmare, a vision he strove desperately to escape. The narrator of *Castle Squander* in a post-Famine Ireland recalls that the Famine was:

something so utterly unprecedented in the annals of human life, as the mingled mass of agony was borne past us upon the wild and pitiless blast, that we find ourselves absolutely incompetent even to describe it. We feel, however, as if that loud and multitudinous wail was still ringing in our ears, against which and the terrible recollections associated with it, we wish we could close them and the memory that brings them into fresh existence.³²

This author, who had traded for so long on his authenticity and shared experiences with the Irish peasantry, could no longer claim the status either of victim or historian: he had not starved, or emigrated, he was no longer representative, in either sense of the word. He responds by deliberately distancing himself from famine victims: first by dehumanising them, making them carrion for dogs or worse, for each other; then, by isolating the Famine in the south and west of the country.

— In a comic scene near the start of *Castle Squander*, Randy, applying for the post of tutor to the Squander boys, avoids exposing his ignorance of mathematics to Dr M'Claret, the Protestant rector, by answering his questions in Irish. M'Claret, who, like Carleton, had begun life as a northern Catholic, does not understand Irish, and asks Randy to explain:

'It is the vernacular, sir, of a certain country, with whose history you are evidently unacquainted. Of a country, sir, whose inhabitants live upon a meal a month; keep very little – for sound reasons – between themselves and the elements, and where abstinence from food is the national diversion.'

'God bless me!' exclaimed the parson, 'that's very odd, very odd indeed, I shall take a note of that; how very like Ireland!'³³

³¹ William Carleton, *Red Hall or, The Baronet's Daughter* (3 vols, London, 1852), vol. 2, 34–5.

³² Carleton, *Castle Squander*, vol. 2, 105.

Irish is thus established as the vernacular of a famine-stricken people, isolating it among the peasantry from whom Carleton had escaped. But the north of Ireland, Carleton's homeland, is spared in *Castle Squander*, despite contemporary reports in the *Banner of Ulster* and the *Belfast Vindicator*, and historical evidence that Ulster certainly partook of the Famine. Tom Squander's property luckily lies in an industrious northern county, and even during the Famine his income is maintained. Henry Squander, also from the north, is in the end able to buy up his ancestral residence in the Encumbered Estates Court. On a visit to Henry's home in Ulster, Randy is amazed at the contrast: 'The trim hedges, the neat and clean culture, the superior dress, the sober and thoughtful demeanour, and the calm air of self-respect and independence which marked the inhabitants of the north, were such as could not for a moment be mistaken.'³⁴ While Carleton is scoring a didactic point about the virtues of his adopted religion, he is also denying that his people, the people of Ulster, were affected by famine. He had suppressed their accent in *Traits and Stories* to achieve cohesive nationality, but now he resurrects it as a barrier against the vernacular of a famine-stricken people. He had revisited his native Clogher Valley in 1847 and found it depopulated by eviction and emigration, but in *Castle Squander* it is re-peopled, newly prosperous, untouched. Like Lord Dunroo of *Red Hall*, Carleton has come to associate Irishness with starvation, brutality and cannibalism: 'call me profligate – spendthrift – debauchée – anything you will but an Irishman.'³⁵ His response was a retreat to history in later novels such as *Willy Reilly* and *Redmond O'Hanlon*.

Carleton's friend, Charles Gavan Duffy, travelling in the west of Ireland in 1849, despaired at what the Famine had done to his countrymen:

Connaught has reached that lowest depth in which there is no lower deep. I declare before Heaven that looking upon the peasantry of the West I have over and again been tempted to pray that GOD by some sudden merciful plague would cut them off the earth and save the land from another generation lower than men, and more unmercifully tasked and driven than the beasts of burden ... The entire peasant children of Mayo seem to be reared up to whine with their first speech, 'give us a hep-ney.'³⁶

Carleton was similarly devastated by this Famine which had divorced him from his people and destroyed his hopes for Irish literature. In *Castle Squander*, he recants his belief in Irish civilisation:

³³ *Ibid.*, vol. 1, 31. ³⁴ *Ibid.*, vol. 2, 185. ³⁵ Carleton, *Red Hall*, vol. 2, 50. ³⁶ *Nation*, 8 September 1849, p. 24.

Is there any great poem that the country can claim as particularly her own? ... Away then with the cant of ancient civilisation. We Celts were never civilised, and are not civilised, nor will be properly so for at least another half century, if even at that period.³⁷

The Famine had proved that, and had destroyed not only Carleton's hopes for Irish literature, but the people who had formed the raw material of his work.

³⁷ Carleton, *Castle Squander*, vol. 2, 207.