



Commemorating the Irish Famine: memory and the monument

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audacious mission to bring about a moral and spiritual regeneration of the English people by engaging with complex ethical, metaphysical, and historical subjects in an experimental fashion that was itself a symbol of the possibilities of grasping and thereby guiding the providential forces of history. It may therefore seem surprising that Froude would expose so clearly Carlyle's personal failings, as he did in his official biography of Carlyle. But Froude did so in order to show just how extraordinary was Carlyle's struggle to overcome his defective nature to bring to the present age his prophetic message. *Thomas Carlyle* (4 vols., 1882–84) was, therefore, no intellectual biography but the biography of a modern prophet, one that traced the development of a prophetic mission out of an immense struggle against personal defects and the conventional beliefs of the day. Froude wrote the biography in this way, "not primarily to underline Carlyle's heroism", argues Brady, "but rather to make clear the struggle which inevitably will be entailed when any individual, more or less defective, elects to follow Carlyle's way" (383). Because Carlyle's mission was also his own, Carlyle's biographer comes across as the most authentic of Froude's various literary personas, the one closest to Froude's actual voice.

Brady is to be commended for bringing such conceptual unity and clarity to Froude's very complex and contradictory set of writings, from the fictional and confessional to the historical and religious, from the political and the personal to the autobiographical and biographical. While focusing largely on the surface of Froude's writings, we ironically get a sense of the depth of Froude's self-appointed mission of Victorian prophecy. We may not like all (or any!) of the views that Froude espoused, but Brady shows that we don't need to like Froude to appreciate that his overall mission of self-abnegation was a noble one.

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Commemorating the Irish Famine: memory and the monument, by Emily Mark-Fitzgerald, Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 2013, 330 pp., £70.00 (hardback), ISBN 9781846318986

On 31 December 2014 the online news site thejournal.ie published an article with the headline "Bones Found on Canadian Beach Came from Children on an Irish Famine Coffin Ship". These remains, including two dozen vertebrae, twelve long bones and pieces of jawbone, had been found on a beach in Quebec in 2011. The article quoted the words of Pierre Cloutier, an archaeologist working on the recovery project: "they are witnesses to a tragic event. You can't have a more tangible witness to tragedy than human remains."¹ Just a few days later, on 4 January 2015, the *Irish Times* ran a piece on Tim Pat Coogan's antipathy towards the idea of a Famine sitcom, currently in development by young Irish scriptwriter Hugh Travers, with a working title of "Hungry". According to Coogan, "we could all be pleasantly surprised, but my initial reaction is one of dismay. Would they make a comedy series about the holocaust? It really does defeat your powers of comprehension."² While the discovery of human remains on a Canadian beach did capture media interest for a period of time, it disappeared from the front pages and the airwaves

relatively quickly. The proposed sitcom, however, at the time of writing, remains a contentious issue, with news reports of UK-based Irish groups picketing the London headquarters of Channel 4, amid questions around the freedom of speech and artistic expression.³ Interestingly, both articles were accompanied by the same image, that of sculptor Rowan Gillespie's Famine memorial on Dublin's Custom House Quay.

Emily Mark-Fitzgerald's formidable and nuanced book, *Commemorating the Irish Famine: Memory and the Monument*, provides a necessary framework through which these very recent examples of the resonance and relevance of the Irish Famine in the contemporary world can be read and understood. The book, which explores nineteenth-century visual representations of the Famine in Ireland and relates these to a wide range of monuments and memorials in Ireland and internationally, is positioned within recent and contemporary scholarship on ideas of collective and cultural memory. This theoretical framework closely explores and examines the relationship between history and memory, and the relationship between the representations of the past and contemporary political and social dynamics. Mark-Fitzgerald draws on the work of a range of scholars who have explored the Irish Famine and its varied representations, as well as the work of those working within the field of memory studies, to problematise ideas around shared, cultural and social memory. Crucially, she emphasises the difference between the monument or memorial and the event itself, isolating the dynamics of memorialisation as her object of study. The reactions to the sombre discovery in Quebec and the proposed sitcom, outlined briefly above, reflect the importance of this differentiation. As Mark-Fitzgerald points out, a heady mix of influences, including "moral obligation, political instrumentality and diverse historical and heritage practices" (8), has characterised the memorialisation of the Famine. While the memorial is voluble, she identifies an emphasis and insistence on the "unspeakability" of Famine experience itself, and on its "traumatic" impact on Irish society. The validity of her observations is borne out in 2015 – the controversial use of memorialised material for the purposes of a sitcom remains highly visible, accumulating political statements as well as column inches and airtime. It stands in contrast, however, to the lack of willingness (or, at least, political reticence) to engage with the physical remains themselves. The fact that Rowan Gillespie's monument was used to illustrate both, however, also reflects Mark-Fitzgerald's exploration of the extent to which the memorial effectively replaces memories, encompassing diverse experiences within one unified and usable narrative. This narrative, she argues, is often centred on the trope of trauma, with explicit connections made to tragedies such as genocide or Holocaust elsewhere providing an instantly recognisable framework through which to "read" the meaning of the Famine in Ireland. Mark-Fitzgerald quotes Christopher Morash on the creation of a "relatively cohesive narrative". According to Morash, "the Famine" can only be known as a "retrospective textual creation", and for all those born after the event "the representation has become the reality".⁴

The second chapter of the book explores the visual language of the Famine experience created during the nineteenth century, a necessary background to Mark-Fitzgerald's examination of Famine "image-making" during the twentieth century. Taking the oft-repeated assertion that the period suffers from a dearth of visual material to task, Mark-Fitzgerald contextualises the "fine art" and "graphic art" images produced according to issues of artistic convention, market forces and the ideological dynamics of where the images were visible, and how they were received. Reflecting the book's critical exploration of the relationship of the present to its representations of the past, Mark-Fitzgerald argues that the frequent and under-problematized use of Famine-era engravings and images in contemporary monuments, museum displays, historical and popular books

reveals the pressing need to reassess and reinterpret these images in their original context. As she argues, “Famine visual imagery has generally been utilized as a useful ‘mimetic’ illustration of archival historical studies rather than an object of inquiry in its own right” (12). Importantly, Mark-Fitzgerald questions a narrow categorisation of “Famine imagery”, arguing that, as the idea of the “Great Famine” of 1845–50 is a retrospective categorisation, a much broader range of artistic work relating to issues of land and social structures can be considered as responses to the period and its events. Several paintings are discussed in detail, such as Daniel MacDonald’s *The Discovery of the Potato Blight in Ireland* (1847), currently in the collection of the National Folklore Collection in University College Dublin. The work is described as a synthesis of picturesque and sublime effects, with the artist carefully negotiating between the depiction of terror and horror, and the creation of an image with strong visual appeal. Indeed, as Mark-Fitzgerald points out, the challenge of creating representations of poverty that would ultimately form part of the décor of polite drawing rooms was an enduring one for artists of the period, as identified by John Barrell in his pioneering study of eighteenth-century British painting, published during the 1980s. She argues that, even considered within the contexts of the ethical picturesque as defined by Ruskin, MacDonald’s work is essentially “a painting still searching to please its viewer, a viewer satisfied by engaging with the tragedy on no more than a cathartic level” (19). Mark-Fitzgerald raises a point regarding the marginalisation of such images within the historiography of Irish art throughout the twentieth century with its emphasis on identifying the avant-garde and narratives of progress and individual genius. Her book redresses this tendency, adding to the work of scholars such as Tom Dunne, Fintan Cullen, Claudia Kinmonth and Mary Jane Boland who have also explored the depiction of social life from this period. This section of the book is particularly valuable in its close reading of the engraved illustrations that have been used as a visual shorthand for the Famine, considering them within the nexus of polite taste and the competitive mid-century periodical market.

Following these close readings of the visual culture responding to the Famine in the nineteenth century, attention is given to the construction of Famine commemoration throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first centuries. Mark-Fitzgerald charts the political and academic engagement with and responses to official commemorative periods, emphasising the emergence of a narrative around moral responsiveness to contemporary famine, together with the discourse of “blame” and “apology”, and the use of the language and conceptual structures of trauma and healing around commemoration. In chapters 5 and 6, Mark-Fitzgerald pays close attention to Famine commemorative practices and monuments in the “diaspora”, problematising the use of this term in valuable ways, and taking issue with its use in relation to Famine-related memory cultures by scholars such as Roy Foster in *The Irish Story: Telling Tales and Making It Up in Ireland* (2001). Mark-Fitzgerald draws on Andreas Huyssen’s paradigm of the “memory sites in an expanded field” to explore the meanings produced by and through Famine memorials in Northern Ireland, Canada, Australia, Britain and North America, emphasising the fact that active forms of identification with an Irish ancestry are not considered “somehow inauthentic, invalid or unsupportable”, but that scholarly method can “convert forms of identification that are often deemed to be natural into social and cultural practices to be explored”.⁵

Writing about the desire to create monuments or commemorative practices that bear “emphatic witness” to the Irish Famine victims, Mark-Fitzgerald does admit that “the sincerity of these efforts precludes glib condemnation of such longings” (90). However, there is a sense that certain commemorative practices are judged as being methodologically “unsound”, particularly following the commemorative period of

1995–97. This assessment is based primarily on their intent, design and political positioning of the monuments. The fourth chapter, however, does engage with community-led activity, with close readings of several memorial sites around the country and a welcome emphasis on the performative aspect of commemoration, such as Famine walks in Mayo, and the incorporation of memorials into tours, heritage trails and remembrance services. The intentions, uses and subsequent care of memorials such as the Knockfierna Famine Commemoration Park in Ballingarry, Co. Limerick and the Skibbereen Famine Memorial in Co. Cork, are considered within local and national contexts, and explored as attempts to contain, connect with or atone for the past, as well as within the sometimes conflicting agendas of commemoration and heritage tourism. Mark-Fitzgerald’s readings of particular monuments, such as those at Grosse Île, Canada, and that beside St Luke’s Anglican Church in Liverpool, using the vocabulary of national and international commemorative visual language, represent a significant addition to the field of visual culture, heritage studies and memory studies more generally. As reiterated in the conclusion, Mark-Fitzgerald points to the shortcomings of many of the memorials and monuments, particularly with regard to their uncomplicated narratives of “triumph over disaster”, the use of stock images, their uncomplicated emotionalism and their avoidance, for the most part, of contemporary issues of forced migration in the world. She provides a list within this conclusion as to what, in her opinion, would constitute a “transformative aesthetic of Famine”. While this is, by her own admission, ambitious, she argues that it is essential for the creation of a “sustained reflection on loss, sacrifice, suffering and legacy – without loss of emotional impact or keen awareness of our complex relationship to this troubled, devastating epoch of history” (280). The book also includes a global survey of Famine monuments as an appendix, which will be of great value to future scholarship in this field.

Mark-Fitzgerald’s close reading of memorials and monuments in the contexts of shared, cultural and social memory reflects a broader shift in Irish studies towards a critical analysis of these key ideas. This is reflected in the publication of a series of books and articles on the subject, in the establishment of the valuable Irish Memory Studies Network,⁶ led by Dr Emilie Pine (UCD), and in events such as the Theatre of Memory symposium, held in 2014 at the Abbey Theatre.⁷ These developments, together with the ongoing revelation of systemic abuse across Irish society throughout the twentieth century, and the concurrent “Decade of Centenaries” have provoked a necessary exploration of ideas of memory, commemoration, the ownership of memory and the spaces of memorialisation and the traumatic past. In this context, Mark-Fitzgerald’s excellent book will have an important position as questions arise around the relationship between the high-profile memory practices relating to the Irish Famine, so centred on creating a usable narrative of the past and of Irish identity, and the more recent traumatic memories which were being actively suppressed and silenced during the same period. *Commemorating the Irish Famine: Memory and the Monument* is sure to enrich several disciplines, from social and visual histories to the study of Irish culture, both in Ireland and throughout the diaspora.

Notes

1. <http://www.thejournal.ie/bones-famine-ship-1859524-Dec2014/> (accessed February 8, 2015).
2. <http://www.irishtimes.com/culture/tv-radio-web/famine-historian-criticises-unsavoury-channel-4-sitcom-1.2054163> (accessed February 8, 2015).
3. <http://www.irishtimes.com/culture/tv-radio-web/uk-based-irish-group-to-picket-channel-4-over-famine-comedy-1.2068712> (accessed February 8, 2015).

4. Morash, *Writing the Irish Famine* qtd in Mark-Fitzgerald, *Commemorating the Irish Famine*, 6.
5. Nash, *Of Irish Descent* qtd in Mark-Fitzgerald, *Commemorating the Irish Famine*, 156.
6. <http://www.ucd.ie/humanities/research/irishmemorystudiesnetwork/> (accessed February 8, 2015).
7. http://www.abbeytheatre.ie/whats_on/event/the-theatre-of-memory-symposium/ (accessed February 8, 2015).

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The British state and the Northern Ireland crisis 1969–73: from violence to power sharing, by William Beattie Smith, Washington, DC, United States Institute of Peace Press, 2011, 374 pp., \$22.50 (paperback), ISBN 9781601270672

The period that is the focus of this well-argued book was pivotal in the development of politics in Northern Ireland over the last fifty years. We might ask why we need another analysis of this period, given the seminal works by eminent political scientists such as Paul Bew and Henry Patterson. Time does lend perspective, however, and William Beattie Smith has the advantage of being able to view events in the context of the later developments. This also allows him to draw from a fuller range of released government papers and – as well as the extensive academic literature – to incorporate reflections from the autobiographies and memoirs of some of the central actors. So, in the nine chapters in this long book, Beattie Smith skilfully weaves together an impressively varied range of material, supplemented by some personal interviews conducted with key policy actors such as civil servants.

The book starts from the premise that “there may be as much wisdom to be harvested from the failures of that early formative period as from later successes” (2). The structure works well, although an ostensibly common set of sub-headings within chapters are not always applied to best advantage. The obligatory treatment of history and politics at the outset is rather basic, more Cooks tour than an engagement with the “preconditions for conflict” (perhaps a “deliberative” framework could have been used to show how different “stories” were used to frame the political conflict). For the core of the book, however, Beattie Smith commendably attempts to go “beyond traditional historical narrative to test hypotheses and systematically identify patterns” (3). While four “case-study” chapters focus on “reform”, “internment”, “direct rule” and “power-sharing”, there is a very welcome focus on policy processes and choices in response to political violence. Four broad models of explanation are used to shed light on the case studies – economic, cognitive process, political, and organisational – each corresponding to “a distinct tradition of policy analysis” (3).