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Since the mid-1990s the number of permanent monuments to the Irish Famine in the 1840s has risen from a small handful to more than one hundred, becoming, perhaps, the most visualised cultural experiences of the Irish across the globe. In exploring the impulse to memorialise this catastrophe, Emily Mark-Fitzgerald charts the diverse social, political and aesthetic dimensions of contemporary Irish memory in the public sphere and suggests ways in which commemorative practices have contributed to the redefinition of a global ethnic community.

The Famine has been a difficult event to represent in formal commemorations. It lacks a specific starting point or ending and contains disparate, disjointed stories rather than a clear, linear narrative. The assertion of a shared memory of the Famine necessarily simplifies the historical reality and creates new references in the present. Mark-Fitzgerald’s work begins by addressing the issue of how an unimaginable event may be made visible, and explores the challenge of creating new representational forms which transcend the stylised imagery of the nineteenth-century, particularly those of the influential Illustrated London News. Mark-Fitzgerald provides a very well-textured examination of the provenance of these engravings including the ideological, artistic, technical and commercial forces within which they were produced. It is a reminder to historians of the limitations of using historical images for purely illustrative purposes. The author notes that their ubiquity in a hugely diverse range of histories of the Famine demonstrates just how ‘orphaned’ these ILN pictures have become.

If nineteenth-century representational tropes have proved extremely robust the meanings mapped onto them are constantly evolving. Throughout most of the twentieth-century it was difficult to create a unified message from the Famine which could be usefully deployed by the Irish state or civic bodies. This was often mistakenly understood as a reflection of widespread ‘silence’ or ‘forgetting’. The work of Niall Ó Ciosáin and
Cormac Ó Gráda has done a great deal to refute the idea that the memory of the Famine lay largely dormant until it was recovered by the commemorative practices of the 1990s. Despite this, however, the obligation to recover the repressed memory of the Famine provided a strong rhetorical thread through commemorations during the sesquicentenary, as did the idea of cultural trauma. The official commemorative period ran from 1995 to 1997 and was co-ordinated by the Irish government’s National Famine Commemoration Committee with a two-year budget of £250,000 per annum. As President, Mary Robinson asserted that commemoration was a ‘moral act’ and drew direct links between famine in the 1840s and world hunger in the late twentieth-century.

Ireland bears the marks of the famine across its landscape. This gives layers of meaning to memory sites, made more vivid through the act of monumental intervention. Mark-Fitzgerald’s chapter on famine spaces in Ireland is particularly evocative and thought-provoking. Using examples such as Carr’s Hill in Cork and Knockfierna in Limerick an intricate examination of the ways in which the relationships between local sites, available iconography and individual personalities created sometimes idiosyncratic, sometimes restrained memorials which nevertheless craved national and international attention. The fact that Skibbereen, a place name intimately associated with the Famine, should see the 150th anniversary as an opportunity to create a project of major tourist and business potential indicates the complexity of Ireland’s relationship with the Famine; the ways in which the past is given meaning in present and the connection between object and viewer. It is also striking that several of the monuments constructed in the 1990s have already fallen out of visibility and into a state of disrepair.

Among the diaspora, in contrast, Famine memorials built in the 1990s have continued to operate as focal points for expressions of Irish ethnicity and Mark-Fitzgerald considers the role of these monuments as indicators of the anxieties which beset notions of Irish identity abroad. However, the inclusion of Northern Ireland in this chapter makes no sense. Irishness in the North of Ireland is not a diasporic identity and the memorial in Enniskillen, which the author examines, was part of the Irish government’s official commemorative programme. Moreover the clear coupling of Northern Ireland with Britain as a way of exploring Famine memory is confusing given the importance accorded by the author to spatial recovery and the excavation of memory in Ireland itself.

However, this book (which also includes a substantial chapter on major memorials such as those in Mayo, Boston and Sydney) is a rich examination of the processes through which the Great Famine was given a heightened visibility from the 1990s and what memorialisation might tell us about identity, politics and economics of the late twentieth-century. The work is meticulously researched, intelligently expressed and amply illustrated. The author has woven some intriguing stories and raised
important questions of the commemorative process in a very valuable contribution to the complex subject of public memory.

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