

UW-Madison Department of History
Semester II, 2004-05

History 200 Seminar

Professor James Donnelly

THE GREAT IRISH FAMINE

COURSE DESCRIPTION

The Great Famine began as a natural catastrophe of extraordinary magnitude, but it was severely compounded in its effects on mortality and emigration by the actions and inactions of the Whig government headed by Lord John Russell. Altogether, about a million people died of starvation and epidemic disease between 1846 and 1851, and some two million emigrated in a period of a little more than a decade (1845-55). Comparison with other modern and contemporary famines establishes beyond any doubt that the Irish famine of the late 1840s, which killed nearly one-eighth of the entire population, was *proportionally* much more destructive of human life than the vast majority of famines in modern times.

This was not an artificial famine as the traditional Irish nationalist interpretation has long maintained—not at any rate at the start. The original gross deficiency of food was real. In 1846 and successive years blight destroyed the crop which had provided approximately 60 percent of the nation's food needs on the eve of the famine. The food gap created by the loss of the potato in the late 1840s was enormous. But far more grain entered Ireland from abroad in the late 1840s than was exported—probably almost three times as much grain and meal came in as went out. Thus there *was* an artificial famine in Ireland for a good portion of the late 1840s as grain imports steeply increased. There existed--after 1847 at least--an absolute sufficiency of food to prevent mass starvation, if it had been properly distributed so as to reach the smallholders and laborers of the west and the south of Ireland.

Why, then, was an artificial famine permitted to occur after 1847, and why didn't the British government do much more to mitigate the effects of the enormous initial food gap of 1846-47? In many contemporary famines a variety of adverse conditions make difficult or impossible the delivery of adequate supplies of food to those in greatest need. Such conditions include warfare and brigandage, remoteness from centers of wealth and relief, poor communications, and weak or corrupt administrative structures. But famine Ireland was not generally afflicted with such adversities. Though it had a rich history of agrarian violence, the country was at peace, its system of communications (roads and canals) had vastly improved in the previous half-century, the Victorian state had a substantial and growing bureaucracy (it generated an army of 12,000 officials in Ireland for a short time in 1847), and Ireland lay at the doorstep of what was then the world's wealthiest nation. Why, then, was not Ireland better able to counteract the consequences of the destruction of most of its traditional food supply?

Comparison with contemporary famines points strongly in the direction of ideology. Today wealthier countries and international organizations provide disaster

assistance (though, alas, often not nearly enough) as a matter of humanitarian conviction and perceived self-interest. But in Britain in the late 1840s prevailing ideologies among the political elite and the middle classes strongly militated against heavy and sustained relief. It will be one of the main purposes of the seminar to come to a thorough understanding of three of these ideologies in particular—the economic doctrines of laissez-faire, the Protestant evangelical belief in divine Providence, and the deep-dyed ethnic prejudice against the Catholic Irish to which historians have recently given the name of “moralism.”

We will begin the seminar by addressing the nature of the famine catastrophe and the serious sins of omission and commission committed by the British government. We will also consider the construction of the memory of the famine in the first half-century after its occurrence and the contending views of historians on the disaster. To reach a deep understanding of the famine, especially as seen from the bottom up, nothing is more important than a close acquaintance with the numerous surviving contemporary accounts, one of which—Annals of the Famine in Ireland by Asenath Nicholson—we will read and discuss at length. This grassroots approach will be extended by our examination of one of the most notable micro-histories of the famine—The End of Hidden Ireland: Rebellion, Famine, and Emigration by Robert Scally, a book which has the great added merit of illuminating the central subject of emigration. Until recent years the role of the Catholic church during the famine years was largely ignored, but that gap has now been filled by the late Donal Kerr’s classic study, ‘A Nation of Beggars’? Priests, People, and Politics in Famine Ireland, 1846-1852, a book that throws a flood of light on the politics of this period. The incidence of the famine differed markedly by class and by region, thus underlining the importance of mapping the varieties of experience among both the victims and the survivors—a goal achieved by a team of Belfast scholars whose work on “the condition” of the population in the years before, during, and after the famine we will also examine. Lastly, since the mass emigration associated with the Great Famine had enormous consequences for the development of the United States, it seemed appropriate that we should conclude the seminar with a review of the outstanding recent survey of Irish America by Kevin Kenny, a scholar who is very attentive to all the main issues deriving from the close transatlantic links between Ireland and the US.

SEMINAR FORMAT

Meetings once a week, each meeting to last two hours (Thursdays, 1:20-3:20); all meetings to be devoted to discussion of the required readings. Some films will be shown at appropriate intervals.

DESIGN OF THE SEMINAR

1. Survey of the Famine (3 weeks)
2. A Contemporary Account—Asenath Nicholson (2 weeks)
3. Micro-history of the Famine—Ballykilcline, Co. Roscommon (2 weeks)
4. The Catholic Church, Politics, and the Famine (3 weeks)
5. Population before, during, and after the Famine (2 weeks)
6. The Famine and the US: The American Irish (2 weeks)

WRITTEN ASSIGNMENTS

A research proposal of about fifteen pages focusing on a question or a set of related questions needing scholarly investigation, and stating the methods and sources to be used in the search for answers.

GRADING SYSTEM

1. Research proposal (50 percent)
2. Informed participation in seminar discussions (50 percent)

REQUIRED READING

Textbook:

James S. Donnelly, Jr., The Great Irish Potato Famine (Sutton Publishing paperback).

Other Required Books:

Donal Kerr, 'A Nation of Beggars'? Priests, People, and Politics in Famine Ireland, 1846-1852 (Oxford University Press paperback).

Kevin Kenny, The American Irish: A History (Longman/Pearson Education paperback).

Asenath Nicholson, Annals of the Famine in Ireland, ed. Maureen Murphy (Lilliput Press paperback).

Robert James Scally, The End of Hidden Ireland: Rebellion, Famine, and Emigration (Oxford University Press paperback).

Liam Kennedy, Paul S. Ell, E.M. Crawford, and L.A. Clarkson, eds., Mapping the Great Irish Famine: A Survey of the Famine Decades (Four Courts Press paperback).