

CHRISTOPHER CUSACK

"Tears stand in the eyes of all alike": Multidirectional Memory in Transgenerational Literary Recollections of the Great Famine, 1892-1921

The Great Irish Famine of 1845-1851, during which one million died of starvation and disease and another million emigrated, is widely considered the formative trauma at the heart of modern Irish history.¹ Though caused by an agricultural disaster, the Famine's eventual scope and ramifications were largely the result of Ireland's problematic constitutional position and British misgovernance, which for many nationalists was proof that the British government had meant to eradicate the Irish peasantry.² This view was not only broadcast during the Famine,³ but was also widely echoed by nationalist writers between 1892 and 1921,⁴ several decades after the Famine, when Ireland was slowly moving towards Independence.⁵

The Famine features centrally in several Irish novels from this period. For many writers, the memory of the Famine was inextricably tied up with questions of Irish identity: Ireland was reinventing itself in an effort to abandon its colonial culture, but in doing so the traumatic memory of the Famine had to be negotiated.⁶ Yet not all authors subscribed to exclusively partisan reading of the catastrophe. They came from widely divergent backgrounds in terms of class, religion, ethnicity, gender, occupation, and political perspective, and the scope of their representations of the Famine is similarly variegated. Thus, while a novel like Aodh de Blácam's *Holy Romans* (1920) emphatically blames the British for the effects of the Famine, the upper-class Anglo-Irish writer Mildred Darby states in her Famine novel *The Hunger* (1910) that "[o]nly by reviewing both sides, and all versions, of the same tale, can a clear mental picture be formed of the years still called by the peasants the 'Hunger Years.'"⁷ As such, The

¹ Diarmaid Ferriter, *The Transformation of Ireland, 1900-2000* (London: Profile, 2005), 28, 44.

² Mike Cronin, *A History of Ireland* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), 136-7.

³ The most famous advocate of this view was the Young Irelander John Mitchel, who wrote at length about the Famine in such books as *Jail Journal* (1854) and *The Last Conquest of Ireland (Perhaps)* (1861).

⁴ See for instance Joseph Guinan's *The Famine Years* (1907) and P.S. O'Hegarty's *John Mitchel* (1917). Most of such texts, as well as the novels here discussed, were written by authors who were born after the Famine, and are therefore examples of what Marianne Hirsch has termed "postmemory."

⁵ Interestingly, more moderate versions of this argument still have some currency among many Irish Studies scholars. See for instance David Lloyd's recent *Irish Culture and Colonial Modernity, 1800-2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011). Lloyd describes the government response to the Famine as a "concerted assault" on characteristically Irish ways of life. (8) For a particularly vociferous attack on such scholarship, see Robin Haines, *Charles Trevelyan and the Great Irish Famine* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2004).

⁶ Seamus Deane, *Strange Country: Modernity and Nationhood in Irish Writing since 1790* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 51.

⁷ Andrew Merry (Mildred Darby), *The Hunger: Being Realities of the Famine Years in Ireland 1845 to 1848* (London: Andrew Melrose, 1910), 2-3.

Hunger champions a more balanced account which problematises commonly accepted perpetrator/victim binaries.⁸

In my paper, I will analyse the political discourse informing the cultural memory of the Famine in Louise Field's *Denis* (1896), Mildred Darby's *The Hunger* (1910), Patrick Sheehan's *Glenanaar* (1905), and Aodh de Blácam's *Holy Romans* (1920). Although these authors were all writing during the period of cultural decolonisation in Ireland, their representations of the Famine vary significantly. Indeed, as is so often the case with cultural memory, different parties have different, and generally conflicting, memories of the event. Yet such memories are often mutually inflective, and my paper will therefore focus on the inherent "multidirectionality" of Famine recollections, to use Michael Rothberg's term, and thus grant insight into the dynamics of literary Famine remembrance.

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⁸ See also Margu rite Corporaal, Christopher Cusack and Lindsay Janssen (eds.), *Recollecting Hunger: An Anthology* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2012), 50.