

# *THE FEMINIZATION OF FAMINE: ENLARGING THE INQUIRY*

*Maureen Murphy*

There is much to praise in Margaret Kelleher's *The Feminization of Famine. Expressions of the Inexpressible?* (1997). Her book is a bold new analysis of the contemporary evidence about the Irish Great Famine of 1845-9. She has examined the visual and verbal images of famine to discover a pattern of female imagery; she has subjected that pattern to a critical analysis, and she has concluded that images of female suffering carry helplessness and hopelessness in their meaning reinforcing the attitude that women are unable to help themselves in such crises.

Kelleher's inter-disciplinary study, a demonstration of the the approach to Irish Studies at Boston College that has proved so effective, considers the contemporary visual images of the Famine in the context of history, literature (particularly William Carleton's *The Black Prophet* [1847] and Anthony Trollope's *Castle Richmond* [1860]) and anthropology and traces Famine themes and images in the work of later Irish writers including Liam O'Flaherty's novel *Famine* (1937) and Tim Murphy's play *Famine* (1977). She discovers, for example, that in the twentieth-century representations of the Famine a frequent motif is the death of the female to ensure the survival of the family or the community and that the female figure, the means to express the inexpressible, becomes the metaphor for the sorrowing country.

Finally, and this is perhaps Kelleher's unique contribution to the famine studies that emerged from the observance of the 150th anniversary of the Famine, Kelleher's study is comparative: she tests her theory of the gendered nature of famine representation not only on the images associated with the Irish Famine but also on the images associated with the Bengali Famine of a century later (1943-44). In doing so, Kelleher offers ways to consider how media uses gendered images to create a spectacle of suffering that focuses on the female as victim. Emotional witness to such spectacle establishes the credentials of compassion and commitment. Kelleher mentions President Mary Robinson being moved to tears when she visited Somalia; others of us remember Bobby Kennedy weeping at the malnourished children of Mississippi.

Besides praising this fine book, I would like to suggest further questions and considerations that *The Feminization of Famine* raised for this reader. Central to Kelleher's thesis is the series of Famine illustrations that appeared in *The Illustrated London News*, the world's first illustrated newspaper that began weekly publication in 1842 and is such a valuable source for social historians. In her essay, "The Great Irish Famine 1845-9: Images versus Reality," Margaret Crawford also examines the forty or so illustrations of the Famine published between 1846-1850 mainly views of the south-west. Both Crawford and Kelleher concentrate on the drawings of James Mahoney, a water-colorist from Cork sent by the *The Illustrated London News* in to the field to record the Famine. He contributed a two-part article with twelve illustrations in 1847 called "Sketches in the West of Ireland." It focused on west Cork: Skibbereen and Clonakilty. In 1849-50, there were seven articles with eighteen drawings called "Condition of Ireland: Illustrations of the New Poor Law."

Like Kelleher, Crawford is interested in interpreting the drawings to determine the extent to which *The Illustrated London News* provided its readers with an accurate record of conditions in Ireland and like Kelleher, Crawford concludes that the effectiveness of image is related to the political and social content of the subject and that the representation of reality is filtered by the artist. She also observes that literary descriptions are more graphic than the drawings. For example, Crawford notices in "Woman Begging in Clonakilty," an image central to Kelleher's argument, that human suffering is portrayed with anguished facial expression, ragged clothes and limited detail rather than with a clinical representation of the anatomy of starvation.

While I take Kelleher's point that the Mahoney's "Woman Begging in Clonakilty" is an icon of the Famine, some of Mahoney's other images: "Boy and Girl at Cahera," "Searching for Potatoes," and "Ejection of Irish Tenantry" would support the argument that Famine images are less rather than more gendered. Look at "Boy and Girl at Cahera," the image Crawford identified as "perhaps the best-known famine illustration." Only their clothes - ragged trousers, tattered skirt - distinguishes their sex. They are both in a field gleaning potatoes. The girl is more actively engaged. Her hand reaches for a small potato to add to those in her apron while the boy hugs his body as he stares at the observer. Behind him is another smaller figure of a woman. The unnamed artist of "Searching for Potatoes" (1849) also switches active and passive gender roles: a woman, identified again by her clothes and long hair, turns the soil with a loy, a boy (her son?) fills a basket with small leavings of potatoes while a male in the background sits with an attitude of despair: head in his hand, eyes downcast.

In the 1848 illustration "Ejection of Irish Tenantry," the male figure is more active, pleading before the bailiff but he is on his knees making a gesture of supplication that one generally associates with female behavior; however, it is the woman

who is making the more aggressive gesture of grabbing the reins of the bailiff's horse albeit on her knees. Similarly, in two drawings that appeared in *The Illustrated London News* for December 1848, the male figures are passive or absent. In "After the Eviction," the male leans his face on his forearm in a gesture of hopelessness while his wife, with a more placid affect, cradles an infant within the shelter. In "A 'Scalpeen' at Dunmore," a mother and child roof a ruin in the "tumbled" village of Dunmore.

My point here is that the Mahoney images can be interrogated and grouped to make different cases. While taking nothing from Kelleher's argument, I would suggest that *The Illustrated London News* drawings can also make a case for the Famine as an ungendering agent, an episode where gender distinctions were blurred in the interest of the common good: survival. Margaret Mac Curtain argues in "Women, the Vote and Revolution" that gender difference were minimized during the Irish troubles (1916-1923), but they were re-established with the new State when women were relegated to domestic spheres. You could argue a similar scenario for post-Famine Ireland: its marriage patterns designed to accommodate the transfer of land to a single inheriting son and dowered daughter. The image of female as active survivor is not a figure in the post-famine Irish landscape; she is, however, the animating spirit of the plucky emigrant girl.

Kelleher's analysis of Indian famine literature suggests some interesting comparisons and departure points for further scholarship. It would be interesting to know something about the Bengali famine in the contexts of Irish-Indian relations and of Bengali history and politics. Declan Kiberd has discussed Irish and Indian affinities in "Ireland and the End of Empire," an essay in his *Inventing Ireland. The Literature of the Modern Nation* that describes the links between Irish and Indian nationalist movements in the early twenties. Eamon DeValera's 1920 talk to the Friends of the Freedom of India mentioned British mishandling of famines in Ireland and India. What was the Irish response to the Bengali Famine? What kind of accounts of that Famine appeared in Irish papers? Was there any kind of Irish outreach to the Indian poor?

While Kelleher is right that the Bengali Famine became an argument for Indian independence and that Bengali was the nationalist heartland, the longer range grievance, the one with the most severe consequences for the Indian sub-continent, was Lord George Nathaniel Curzon's 1905 Partition of Bengal into predominantly Hindu West Bengal and predominantly Muslim East Bengal. The partition was rescinded in 1911 partition as an administrative solution had been put in place however temporarily. As well as that, the interim period saw a campaign of terrorism that included assassins who claimed their victims were an offering to Kali.

In the section titled "Famine as Female: the Fate of Kali" Kelleher discusses the figure of the Hindu "black goddess" in the Indian literature of famine. While Kelleher appears to concentrate on Indian famine literature in the context of Hindu mythology, I wonder would Kelleher have something to tell us about the way Muslim writers addressed the Bengali Famine, particularly if they too appropriated mythological sources. Are there differences in the treatment of the Bengali Famine in this much politicized state?

Much of Kelleher's discussion of female images in Bengali literature concerns prostitution and the sale of children. At first glance there would appear to be little to compare with conditions in Ireland during the Great Famine. Kelleher cites the paucity of reference to prostitution in Famine accounts and discusses the rare appearance of an Irish prostitute in Famine literature: the figure of Bridie, a woman who sells herself to get money to feed a pregnant woman, in Gerard Healy's 1945 Famine play *The Black Stranger*. Kelleher is right about the rare mention of prostitution in Famine accounts; however, the work Maria Luddy has done in prostitution, especially her chapter "Prostitution and Rescue Work" in her *Women and Philanthropy in Nineteenth-century Ireland* (1995) offers a starting point for further investigation of this subject.

Finally, on the sale of children. Kelleher describes the sale of girls into prostitution in exchange for money and food and the sale of boys and girls in the belief that children would survive in the household of the buyer. Again, there appears to be no comparable Irish tradition at first sight; however, the workhouse numbers indicate that children were left at the workhouse or abandoned outright with the understanding, perhaps, that such abandoned children would become public charges. For example, one-third of the Irish workhouse girls sent to Australia aboard the *Thomas Arbuthnot* which arrived in Sydney in February 1850 were not orphans. Their parents were unable to look after them. The work that Caroline Chishom did with her colonization society that provided loans for passage to try to help immigrants, including the Irish servant girls with whom she worked, bring out family members to Australia suggests that at least some Irish "orphans" were reunited with their kin.

Let me finish my comments with a few words about Asenath Nicholson's *Annals of the Famine in Ireland*, an account that Kelleher considers in her chapter "The Female Gaze: Nineteenth-Century Women's Famine Narratives." Nicholson is an example of the female who devises strategies for survival, not for herself but for others. Kelleher argues that such women are featured less in famine imagery than women who suffer. In her discussion of Nicholson's account of the Famine, Kelleher admires Nicholson as a witness who was not simply a woman at the keyhole gazing at the spectacle of Famine suffering. She mentions Nicholson's work distributing Famine relief. I'd like to pause at Kelleher's work distribution to suggest the ways that

Nicholson “crossed the threshold” to minister to the Irish poor and why I believe hers is such a model of charity to take from the Irish Famine.

Early on Nicholson determined that she could not save everyone but that she could save some and she dedicated herself to that mission. She ran her own soup kitchen on Cook Street; she went into the homes of her people in the Liberties and made food for them; she crossed the city each morning distributing bread as she walked; she collected and distributed clothing; she prayed with sufferers; she wrote widely to her friends, to the press and to people who could be helpful. In her writing she used various literary genres: parable, biography, satire to make her case for the Irish poor. As Kelleher observes, Nicholson believed the Famine was neither a natural disaster nor a Divine judgement, it was man-made and as such needed basic changes in economics and politics to prevent a repetition of 1845-49. For example, she believed with John Bright in : “Abolition of primogeniture for underived property, registry of property, reduction of the enormous charges for stamps for the sale and purchase of land, security of tenure for the practical laborers of the soil, abolition of the Established Church in Ireland, extension of the suffrage and reinforcement of the representature in the Imperial Parliament” (Nicholson 166).

An aspect of the politicization of Famine philanthropy which is seldom noticed is the moral dilemma that faced the Central Relief Committee of the Society of Friends about whether or not to accept Famine relief from slave states. (They did and Nicholson approved though she was an ardent abolitionist, the friend of the Tappan brothers who launched the American Anti-Slavery Society from her temperance boarding house in New York.)

Kelleher makes an interesting comparison between Nicholson and her contemporary, the Irish writer Maria Edgeworth, on the subject of “gratuitous” relief. I don’t think they were as far apart as Kelleher suggests. Both believed that employment was the only answer. Employment is the *leitmotif* of Nicholson’s 1847 account of her first visit to Ireland, *Ireland’s Welcome to the Stranger* which can be read as a Jeremiad in its stern warning of the inevitable disaster brought on by the want of work. She was unimpressed with O’Connell because she believed Ireland need work more than Repeal. By the time Nicholson was working in Erris in the bleak winter of 1847-48, the need had moved beyond employment schemes to direct relief to keep the poor alive.

It is my impression from my own field work in North Longford that while chronically impoverished, they did not suffer to the same extent as the poor of the west. For one thing, as Mary E. Daly has pointed out in *The Famine in Ireland*, resident landlords like the Edgeworths were critical to local relief efforts (Daly 84). Both women were concerned that those receiving aid would be treated with dignity and one can be sure that the barrels of food that arrived from America for Edgeworth and for Nicholson aboard the *Macedonia* were distributed with compassion and tact.

Finally, it would be interesting to see how Kelleher’s famine model would work when read in the context of the literature and history of hunger in the Brazilian Northeast. Would we find Kelleher’s paradigm with its recurring images of mothers and children’s suffering used to “express the inexpressible”?

## WORKS CITED

- Crawford, Margaret. “The Great Irish Famine 1845-9: Images versus Reality.” Brian P. Kennedy and Raymond Gillespie, eds. *Ireland into History*. Dublin: Town House, 1994. pp. 75-88.
- Kelleher, Margaret. *The Feminization of Famine. Expressions of the Inexpressible?* Cork: Cork University Press, 1997.
- Daly, Mary E. *The Famine in Ireland*. Dublin: Dublin Historical Association, 1986.
- Kiberd, Declan. *Inventing Ireland. The Literature of the Modern Nation*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1995.
- Mac Curtain, Margaret. “Women, the Vote and Revolution.” Margaret Mac Curtain and Donnacha O’Corráin, eds. *Women in Irish Society*. Dublin: Arlen House, 1978.
- Nicholson, Asenath. *Annals of the Famine in Ireland*. ed. Maureen Murphy. Dublin: Lilliput Press, 1998.