

# *THE FEMINIZATION OF FAMINE* BY MARGARET KELLEHER THE AUTHOR'S RESPONSE TO MAUREEN MURPHY'S ARTICLE.

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## Introduction

My study, *The Feminization of Famine*, was published in 1997 and thus became part of the commemoration of the 150th anniversary of the Great Irish Famine (1845-1851). As a doctoral student in Boston College, I became interested in the very different images of famine portrayed in Irish texts, ranging from Anthony Trollope's *Castle Richmond* (published in 1860 and based on Trollope's observations while living in Ireland during the famine period) to Liam O'Flaherty's novel *Famine* (first published in 1937 and arguably the most successful Irish famine narrative).

When studying famine literature, one confronts very quickly some of the most basic questions concerning literary representation: is language adequate to the depiction of the horrors of famine; more specifically, is a genre such as the novel suitable to the task; and what strategies of representation are employed by writers to cope with the literary challenges they encounter? What I've called "the feminization of famine" is one of the most significant and obvious patterns of representation in famine texts, i.e. when writers seek to depict the crisis of famine in individual terms, they employ images of women – most frequently, images of the mother and child – to convey the extent of the catastrophe and the challenges posed to human relations. Thus, recurring figures in famine texts – past and present – include the mother unable to feed her child, a child suckling at the breast of the dead mother, a woman unable to bury her child, a mother snatching food from her child or, her heroic opposite, a woman sacrificing all in order to feed her children.

This is not to say that these are the only famine images. Nor should it imply that only women suffered or suffer in famine conditions. But what is clear is that writers, when faced with a crisis such as famine – a crisis in society and a feared crisis in representation – turn more often to female figures, as a means both of portraying social breakdown and of evading the feared breakdown in literary representation. Why this is the case, and what are the effects of these images for a reader's or viewer's understanding of famine, emerged as the central questions to be explored in my work. And my conclusions included the following paradox: images of mothers and their children rank among the most affecting of famine scenes yet can also serve to obscure rather than extend an understanding of why famine has occurred. Scenes such as a mother unable to feed her child spell collapse in the primordial order yet such conventional associations of the female with nature and domesticity run the risk of suggesting that famine is a natural rather than political crisis, one which is inevitable rather than avoidable.

## Response

I am most grateful to Maureen Murphy for her detailed and generous comments. She raises many important subjects; I would like to respond in particular to three: the visual imagery of famine, the importance of inter-disciplinary approaches, and the issues inherent to comparative study.

As Murphy highlights in her article, "visual and verbal images of famine" deserve attention. My study concentrates on the written word, examining images of famine in narrative descriptions, ranging from novels and stories to eye-witness accounts and travel writing, with brief references to contemporary visual images of the time. Murphy's fuller commentary on the *Illustrated London News* images, given in this issue, together with the analysis by Margaret Crawford to whom she refers, clearly demonstrates the value of extending scrutiny to visual imagery of famine. In addition, the work of famine historian Peter Gray and art historian Catherine Marshall has restored to attention a much wider range of visual sources; this was also demonstrated in the four-part television documentary on the Great Famine made in 1995 by Irish film-maker Louis Marcus. A number of these images are also available from various web-sites concerned with Irish famine material.

The specific questions raised by a study of famine sources have also more general implications. At the recent ACIS conference in Florida, April 1998, a deepening interest in the visual aspects of Irish culture was evident, one example being the Boston College panel, "Redressing Cathleen", a study of images in art and literature. A number of important publications on Irish art have also recently emerged from Boston College, and the college has paved the way for other academic institutions, in hosting a number of significant exhibitions by Irish artists. The attention paid by the ABEI newsletter to Irish artists is also a pioneering contribution to the study of Irish visual culture, and the importance of the Sao Paulo Bienal exhibition suggests that Brazilian Irish Studies will continue to be an important location for such enquiry.

Other papers presented at the ACIS conference looked at the importance of female representations in other contexts, such as Mary Helen Thuente's work on United Irishman iconography and Perry Curtis's work on "images of Erin" in Irish-American political cartoons. Up to now, the "aisling" figure, "Cathleen Ni Houlihan" and "Mother Ireland" have been the best-known from the Irish tradition; yet much work remains to be done on the origins and use of these figures. There exists a great danger of oversimplifying the genealogy of female representations, of seeing an eighteenth-century or nineteenth-century image as having an uninterrupted or unproblematic link with the Celtic sovereignty goddess, for example, or of translating all female figures into personifications of Ireland. The detailed work of English critic Marina Warner on what she calls the "allegory of the female form" and her careful attention to historical context is an important model for future Irish studies. In a related point, a striking feature of contemporary Irish women's writing is its refusal of the allegorical form: from Eavan Boland's prose work *Object Lessons* to the poetry of Boland, Paula Meehan and Nuala Ni Dhomhnaill, one can trace a marked determination to restore the individual details of women's experience – the complexities and realities which could not "fit" in previous idealisations.

Women's studies, as a discipline, in Ireland and elsewhere, has from the first recognised the importance and benefits of an interdisciplinary approach. In the case of a topic like famine studies, an interdisciplinary approach is almost inevitable. I was fortunate to have available the work of Cormac Ó Gráda, an economic historian who has also published extensively on famine folklore and famine songs. Other models came from my post-graduate studies in North America and, more recently, from the example of close friends who work or have worked for Irish non-governmental associations, in the development field. Their work is a constant reminder that the issues of hunger and injustice which I discuss in relation to the past are still very much with us, and that the close scrutiny of images of disaster, together with a questioning of their political function, is equally urgent in the present. The postscript to the book aims to address, though very briefly, these more contemporary implications in relation to media and journalistic depiction of recent crises and has, I would hope, resonances for various situations, be it famine in Somalia or hunger in the Brazilian North-East.

Finally, Maureen Murphy's positive response to the comparative aspect of the volume is most welcome. Comparative studies remain at a very early stage in Irish studies, and are treated with more than a little suspicion in some contexts within Irish academia. Why this is the case is not clear: some of the opposition is based on an often justifiable fear that comparisons will obscure specific historical and cultural differences; but in other cases the hostility seems to run much more deeply, prematurely closing avenues for exploration and adopting a very defensive position towards one's own academic "territory".

I would suggest that Irish studies "at home" has much to learn from its colleagues abroad as to the benefits of comparative studies: my recent visit to Brazil, to universities in São Paulo, João Pessoa, Rio de Janeiro and Belo Horizonte, certainly convinced me of this. In the case of famine studies, rich potential for comparative work exists between Irish novels and Brazilian writings by Graciliano Ramos, João Cabral de Melo Neto and others. In addition, the future film adaptation of Liam O'Flaherty's *Famine* (screenplay already completed by Roddy Doyle) will provide a very interesting opportunity to analyse Glauber Rocha's theories of the aesthetics of famine in a comparative context. My thanks to the students and staff of USP, UFPB, UFRJ and UFMG who made me aware of these and other potential comparisons.

The 150th commemoration of the Great Irish Famine has now ended at an official level in Ireland, regrettably so since famine mortality continued long after 1847, to 1848, 1849, 1850 and 1851. Yet already much of the silence long surrounding the famine in popular knowledge, historical studies and literary representations, has been broken and a remarkable level of interest, among Irish people of all ages and backgrounds, has been displayed concerning this episode of our past. What consequences, if any, this greater knowledge of the past will have for our engagement with the present, culturally and politically, remains to be seen.

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