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Famine Commemoration and Migration

I'd like to start by reflecting briefly on one of the most well known and reproduced 19th century visual sources from the Famine period: the wood engravings that accompanied the articles 'Sketches in the West of Ireland,' by Irish author and artist James Mahony in 1847, as published in the Illustrated London News. Although my talk will address primarily 20th and 21st c. Famine images and commemoration, images such as 'Bridget O Donnel and Children' or 'Boy and Girl at Cahera' — extensively reproduced today as illustrations for Famine books, exhibits and other projects—are by no means straightforward depictions of Famine. However relative to other areas of Famine scholarship, our understanding of the genealogies of Famine visual knowledge—the visual culture and legacy of the Famine from the 19th c. to the present—is still rather rudimentary. To conceptualise and track the evolution of a contemporary 'visual culture' of Famine, we must account for such images' context, technologies, and related aesthetics. They demonstrate that what we often take to be 'natural' images of the Famine are of course constructed, and their reception by audiences (past and present) is wholly dependent on the economies and philosophies of making and seeing.



James Mahony, 'Boy and Girl at Cahera', Illustrated London News, 20 February 1847

For example, periodical illustration, particularly that of the Illustrated London News (itself only founded in 1842, and still experimental in its alliance of art and text), involved so many agents of production (artist, engraver, editor, printer, etc.) that it is inaccurate to truly speak of a singular 'artist' in reference to these visual productions. If we take a closer look at these images, we can easily make out distinctive mark of the burin/graver (themselves the reverse of marks made initially by the artist), and places where ink overflows the printing blocks' raised surfaces. The wood engraved blocks that were used for these images required less printing pressure than etched/engraved copper plates, hence their greater uniformity of impressions and longevity (this is all part of technical success/capability of illustrated journalism, that transformed the mass media of the mid-19th century). It's important that when we look at these images to remember their materiality, and furthermore, their journey of translation from witness, to sketch, to engraving, to illustration of text (and all the steps in between – thus their status as document or source is extraordinarily complex, and their relationship to truth and seeing even more so).



James Mahony, 'Sketches from the West of Ireland', Illustrated London News, 20 February 1847

If we go from the micro to the macro: the newspaper's still-evolving (and at times, haphazard) approach to page design and layout is evident in the double spread of the 20 February issue which ends abruptly midway through the second page; the remaining page space is taken up with an illustration related to a story beginning on the following page ('The Royal Society- The Marquis of Northampton's Conversazione'). The illustration, an interior drawing of a grand soiree held at the Marquis' palatial residence, is in stark contrast with the representations of extreme

poverty it faces. Untroubled by this juxtaposition, the out-of-place engraving simply fit the space available, trumping any consideration of appropriate narrative correlation.

So despite the frequent use of these Illustrated London News engravings to illustrate more recent Famine histories based on documentary resources, the notion that these are simply 'visual records' of the Famine is of course an illusion: they are fraught with inconsistencies, limited by standards of artistic taste and audience reception related to social subject painting of the period from which they draw their inspiration, and affected by the hybridized visual/textual experimentation and technology of the emergent form of illustrated journalism.

I won't be dwelling at any length on the complex visual history of 19th c. Famine images – but I use this initial example (and this suggestion that we should think more deeply about the making, seeing and reading of these visual objects) as a means of illustrating how I've approached my recent work investigating the worldwide construction of Famine monuments since the mid-1990s, and their relationship to both a visual culture of Famine representation, and the place of the Famine's memory in contemporary public space. In essence, I am interested in both the poetics and mechanics of public monuments: the business of their making, the iconography they draw from and create, and the narratives of their becoming. Just like these visualizations of Famine from the Victorian period, I would argue that the diversity and volatility of what's often referred to as the 'collective' phenomenon of recent Famine commemoration compels a redefinition of contemporary Famine memory from a distinct and recoverable 'thing' or set of beliefs, towards an understanding of it as an unfolding series of processes, positions and perspectives.

Over the past 6 years or so I've travelled across Ireland, Northern Ireland, England, Scotland, Wales, the United States, Canada, and Australia, documenting examples of Famine monuments, interviewing and corresponding with hundreds of individuals and organizations (artists, politicians, community groups and heritage associations) who sponsored and created them. These site visits and interviews revealed a striking commemorative landscape: more than one hundred Famine memorial projects executed over the last ten years (five of which had budgets over one million euro), significant differences between representational choices made in different national contexts (whether Canadian, Australian, Irish, British or American), a passionate and often fierce embrace of the commemorative enterprise by largely grassroots local history groups and diasporic organisations, and a plurality of Famine memories articulated by various projects. Not all of these monuments involved the participation of professional artists—many did not—and my study purposefully sought to include representations from across a wide spectrum of budget, scale and community, rather than focusing solely on high profile, high-concept works of public art.

No small amount of energy nor resources have been expended on these memorials: the recent memorials in Philadelphia and New York cost \$2.75 million and \$5 million respectively, and the number and geographical spread of Famine monuments has expanded rapidly since the 1990s. In terms of geographical distribution, monuments were constructed in nearly every county of the Republic

(I've recorded 75 at least), though only 5 in Northern Ireland. Perhaps not surprisingly only a few monuments have been constructed in Britain: in Cardiff, Wales, Carfin, Scotland (just outside Glasgow), and Liverpool (also a very small monument on Islay). To date there are two in Australia (one in Melbourne, and the other in Sydney), more than 17 in Canada, and at least 25 in the US (where the enthusiasm for building Famine monuments has outstripped my ability to keep track of them all!). I'll be launching a comprehensive online database of these monuments in the autumn to coincide with the publication of my book *Commemorating the Irish Famine: Memory and the Monument*, from Liverpool University Press, and I hope the website will serve as a useful reference tool, as it will contain hundreds of images, full inscriptions, location and brief historical details.

Certainly the siting of these memorials differed most substantially between Ireland and the U.S. Memorials in Ireland and Northern Ireland were concentrated primarily in Famine graveyards, former workhouses and other sites redolent of local Famine experience, though these places are often on the periphery of towns and are seldom visited. Physical residues dating from the Famine were frequently incorporated into memorial projects (workhouse walls, soup kitchen pots, millstones, etc.) However monuments in the diaspora have more often placed in urban locations or expressly public settings like parks, and generally make use of imported Irish materials in their construction (quaystones, standing stones, Irish trees/landscaping elements). Yet in both Ireland and the diaspora, in the case of both massive and humble monuments to the Famine, the driving force behind monuments has usually been collectives of private individuals, not any agency of the state, itself an interesting development.



Examples of recent Famine monuments (left to right, top to bottom): Ardsley, NY (2001); Olean, NY (2000); Athy, Co Kildare (2000); Grosse Ile, Quebec (1998); Melbourne, Victoria (1998); Kingston, Ontario (2002); Enniskillen Co Fermanagh (1996); Tralee, Co Kerry (1997); Buffalo, NY (1997); Doolough, Co Mayo (1994); Liverpool, England (1998); Limerick, Co Limerick (1997); Clones, Co Monaghan (2001); Roscommon, Co Roscommon (1999); Sligo, Co Sligo (1997); Mullingar, Co Westmeath (1994). Images © Emily Mark-FitzGerald

From an aesthetic point of view, the stylistic diversity of these monuments is truly remarkable: from reconstructed thatch cottages to simple laser-etched granite markers, heart-shaped fountains, to elaborate figurative bronzes, community gardens to a ¼ acre of Irish landscape tilted in the middle of New York City. The evocation of emotion and affective response has played an important role in the framing of Famine experiences for a public audience, whether through memorials'

meditations on the scale of death and loss (as in Ireland) or figurative representations on the emigrant experience (as in the diaspora).

Most Famine monuments worldwide (with a few exceptions) display an intensely conservative visual approach, with a large number relying on a small body of nineteenth century prototypes (such as newspaper engravings or high crosses) and megalithic reconstructions of passage tombs or standing stones. Though these monuments inevitably bear the thumbprints of the 20th century, their appeal to the viewer and choice of iconography is rooted in the 19th: there is no shortage of shamrocks, coffin ships, nor Bridgets on plinths.

In Ireland, with the majority of monuments situated in Famine cemeteries, former workhouses, and other rural locations, commemorative groups have generally (though not exclusively) opted for low-key, minimal interventions. However they frequently reference (in location, form or inscription) a wide range of local political particulars (from cultural tourism, to anxieties over Celtic tiger developments which encroached upon burial grounds). Or alternatively, some local monuments reflect the significant role played by development NGOs like Concern and Action from Ireland during the 150th anniversary: these are but a few of the many lenses through which Famine memory was screened in the Republic. The construction of such monuments, and the rituals attending them, have attempted a reversal of perceived historical neglect—ostensibly re-performing the act of publicly respectful burial and remembrance the Famine's victims were initially deprived—yet they have also resituated the Famine into familiar contemporary models of Irish commemorative behaviour, practice, and heritage consumption.

The contexts of these projects grow ever more varied as we look further afield: In Northern Ireland the legacy of the Troubles and tensions surrounding republican commemoration have dogged community Famine projects (and their relative scarcity). The 'official' Famine monument in Enniskillen by Irish sculptor Eamonn O'Doherty, for example, was joined a few years later by an 'unofficial' and contentious Bobby Sands memorial constructed on the previously uncommemorated mass gravesite near the former workhouse (now a public park). In Britain contemporary sectarian divisions as well as traditions of First/Second World War commemorations have left their imprints on commemorative projects in Carfin, Scotland and Liverpool, respectively. And in Canada the commemorative templates established by Catholic fraternal organizations in the late nineteenth-early twentieth century have circumscribed nearly every recent Famine memorial (with almost every example adopting the 'celtic' or high cross form, including examples in Kingston/Saint John/Quebec – all likely influenced by the iconic 1909 high cross erected by the Ancient Order of Hibernians to mark the Famine burial grounds at Grosse Ile in Quebec. In the U.S. a wide diversity of commemorative and historical references have included U.S. Civil War history, Holocaust memory and the politics of genocide, amongst many others. The monument in Olean, New York, for example, contains stones from the American Civil War battlefield of Antietam, inserted into the memorial to honour the history of the Irish 'Fighting 69th' New York Brigade. The committee who erected the Philadelphia Irish Hunger memorial in 2003 (created by sculptor Glenna Goodacre) explicitly rejects use of the term 'famine' to describe the crisis, foregrounding a Mitchelite interpretation of the

Famine that is mirrored by the massive bronze figurative monument's dramatization of Irish starvation and American deliverance.

The juxtaposing of Irish Famine remembrance along such a range of resonances demonstrates how the act of commemoration often slips loosely across the field of memory—both in terms of the historical analogies that have been drawn by committees, and also physically in sharing civic sites already occupied by other public memorials, whilst borrowing from their iconography and ritual traditions. In other words, the Famine's commemoration palpably demonstrates how various episodes and generations of commemoration have often been layered upon one another. These commemorative projects therefore further evidence how Famine memory now frequently operates as a 'floating signifier' which defines symbolic forms of Irishness at home and abroad, and the idea that it can be tied down to any fixed meaning, significance, or unitary 'collective memory' is demonstrably false. To truly understand the global and astonishingly diverse phenomenon of Famine commemoration we have to consider how these monuments represent transnational intersections of local, national, and global narratives and iconographies: the permutations of memory they visually manifest owe their evolution to all three dimensions.

Indeed the visual vocabulary of Famine remembrance as it has developed across Ireland and the diaspora suggests there is no strict hierarchy of influence, as public memorials have drawn from sources including Irish prehistorical monuments (as in the standing stone selected as the primary symbol in Buffalo's Famine memorial), nineteenth-century Famine images (replicated in many projects, from Philadelphia to Keansburg NJ to Providence Rhode Island), medieval symbols that were later themselves reappropriated as late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century national icons of Irishness (as in Portland's Famine memorial, a full size reproduction of the Cross of the Scriptures of Clonmacnoise), war commemoration (Maya Lin's famed Vietnam Veterans' Memorial is a clear influence on the newer monument constructed at Grosse Ile in Quebec from 1998), images of the Holocaust (one of the figures in Rowan Gillespie's Dublin memorial, Famine, is based on a photograph of a concentration camp survivor), and pragmatic imitations of other groups' design concepts (led less by historical relevance than by convenient availability of raw materials). The project in Buffalo, NY for example utilised quaysstones imported from Co Cork – and had a few left over, which were donated to projects in Olean NY and Michigan Hills. Famine memorial designs have distilled from a pool of aesthetic models rather than any single tributary, but nearly twenty years of monument-making have revealed it to be a rather stagnant reservoir of inspiration.

Yet whether prescriptive or interrogative in their aesthetic approach, all recent monuments share a common aim to amplify the public presence of Famine memory through evocation of a wide range of associative reference: melancholy and mourning, grief and grievance, nostalgia and negation, transformation and transcendence. That some of these qualities lie in opposition to one another does not foreclose the possibility of their co-existence within singular projects, nor diminish the value invested in them by their creators and commissioners. Most essentially none of these projects can be understood without reference to one another; their interconnectedness is conceptual, processual and practical: for

example, Rowan Gillespie's original concept for the Dublin Famine memorial had in fact been considered as a possible memorial for Boston, but the committee there had found his work 'too abrasive'. Sculptor Joan Walsh Smith, a finalist in the Boston competition, had her design rejected for the Boston memorial on the grounds it was too symbolic and not figurative enough, yet her proposal would later be dropped from consideration for Sydney's Famine memorial for the opposite reason. Such information reminds us that the linear narratives of memorial construction as portrayed on unveiling plaques, project websites and effusive media reports may not always tell the whole story of a monument's path towards realization: their dogma is in the details.

I'm often asked which Famine commemorative projects I would point to as representing the most unusual or effective engagements with the Famine past. It's a difficult question to answer in one respect: I certainly don't believe that elaborate commemorative interventions are always required to provoke a profound and moving encounter with the Famine and its residues. Neither am I of the view that permanent fixtures in landscape (the traditional 'monument') are the only means through which the historical past can be meaningfully remembered in the public sphere. However projects such as the recent memorials in Sydney, Australia (1999) and Battery Park, New York City (2002) demonstrate the benefits of when contemporary artists have been professionally engaged, given creative freedom and support, and consequently have produced public artworks that are aesthetically and conceptually sophisticated, offer a nuanced reading of the relationship between memory and history, yet do not forget their commemorative function. The very best public artworks in this realm recognize that the forces of public memory are fluid and mercurial, even while they respect and anticipate the deep human needs and desires that inspired their commissioning.

However I think we have yet to exhaust the possibilities of creating meaningful visual engagements with the Famine past and its legacy. What might a progressive aesthetic of Famine look like? I believe it would intersect with past histories of representation without reverting to a simplistic re-staging of the encounter between victim and viewer, and in so doing acknowledge the disparity of Famine suffering and its mixed legacy to the diaspora. It would refuse easy sympathies or empathies with their experience, and resist the collapsing of historical difference. As Susan Sontag observed, 'no "we" should be taken for granted when the subject is looking at other people's pain.' It would be wary of the easy hit of sentimentality whilst remaining mindful that striking an emotional chord remains a powerful mode of viewer engagement. Visually it would present an object or image that invites repeated looking and thinking, not merely a shorthand of ethnic stereotype. Such a work would demonstrate appropriateness to site and spatiality, anticipate likely modes of visitor encounter, yet not overburden itself with over-determining possible responses.

As the programme for Ireland's 'decade of commemoration' accelerates—and Famine monuments also continue in planning and development—devising robust strategies for commemorative public artworks will remain a vitally important endeavour. A better understanding of the values assigned to the Famine past by the present—and the means by which public art and commemoration have mediated these memories for diverse publics over the past two decades—can help inform

these processes. Calls for commemoration continue to echo across a wide spectrum of experiences—from the Magdalene Laundries to the child victims of sexual abuse in Ireland’s institutions—and memorials to these histories will occupy central locations within civic space for decades to come. We have a responsibility to participate in debates concerning these sites’ development, and to encourage the development of artistic practice and new forms of community engagement in the public realm, and most essentially, precipitate a deeper encounter between past and present, within ourselves and across historical time.