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**Eating People is Wrong: Famine's Darkest Secret?**

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## EATING PEOPLE IS WRONG: FAMINE'S DARKEST SECRET?<sup>1</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

Cannibalism is one of our darkest secrets and taboos. It is the ultimate measure of the resilience or otherwise of civilizational processes to extreme conditions. How common was cannibalism in times of famine in the past? Both the nature of the evidence for famine cannibalism and the silences about it challenge the empirical historian to the limit. After a review of the global historiography, this paper attempts to assess the evidence for cannibalism during Ireland's many famines, culminating in the Great Irish Famine of the 1840s.

KEYWORDS: famine, cannibalism

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The act of cannibalism symbolizes how far human beings are willing to let themselves fall.

Kon Ichikawa, Japanese film-maker

On looking around I noticed a woman lying on her face. She was dead and perfectly naked...and the side of her face and breast were gnawed away. Two famished-looking men and a woman were seated a few yards off glaring at the body with wolfish eyes. Could famine have driven them to this horrible repast? I would not believe, and yet I could not doubt it, so hungry and ravenous were their looks...

William Brittlebank (1873: 180-181)

American historian John Post's *The Last Great Subsistence Crisis in the Western World* (1977) is a classic work of famine history. The title referred to the European famine that followed the dark and cold summer of 1816, when (in Lord Byron's words) 'The bright sun was extinguish'd, and the stars did wander darkling in the eternal space, rayless, and pathless, and the icy earth swung blind and blackening in the moonless air'.

Post's striking title was a misnomer, an exercise in historic license. Insofar as England and France were concerned, Post was broadly right. England had not experienced what BBC journalist Michael Buerk famously dubbed 'biblical famine' since before the Black Death and France's last such famine had occurred during the devastating winter

of 1709-10. But in the western world more broadly defined, the era of famine—and famine is defined here as ‘a shortage of food or purchasing power that leads directly to excess mortality from starvation or hunger-induced diseases’—would not end for another 130 years. The famines linked to the failure of the potato in the 1840s, including the Great Irish Famine but lesser famines too in the Low Countries and in parts of what is now Germany, were still to come, as was the Finnish famine of 1868. So was the famine that resulted from the Allied blockade of Germany in 1918-19, the massive Soviet famines of 1920-22 and 1931-33, and the several war famines of World War 2. But the dubious distinction of ‘last subsistence crisis in the western world’ goes to Moldova and adjoining parts of Ukraine in 1946-47.

Moldova’s was no small famine, relatively speaking; in the Soviet Union, as in Ireland but not as in Britain or France, the era of famines came to an end with a bang, not a whimper. It seems that in Moldova as many as 0.2 million<sup>2</sup> out of a population of 2.5 million perished. But little has been written about it and what has been written has been colored by the Cold War and the post-Soviet legacy (Zima 1999; Wheatcroft 2009). Moldova had become Soviet as recently as 1940 as a by-product of the Nazi-Soviet pact. For Russian historian V. F. Zima its famine was the product of excessive grain procurements by Moscow.

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<sup>2</sup> This number may be on the high side. It is based on the monthly numbers of deaths in 1946 and 1947 given in Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly, Document 12173, 1<sup>st</sup> March 2010  
[[assembly.coe.int/Main.asp?link=/Documents/WorkingDocs/Doc10/...](http://assembly.coe.int/Main.asp?link=/Documents/WorkingDocs/Doc10/...)]

For Soviet specialist Stephen Wheatcroft, by contrast, the famine must be analyzed against the backdrop of a critical food supply situation in the Soviet Union and elsewhere at the time. And there is no denying the role of food supply: in 1945 in the Russian Federation, less affected than the famine zones, grain output was less than half the prewar norm (25.4 versus 51.9 million tons), and in the following year it was lower still (21.2 million tons) (Dronin and Bellinger 2005: 158). Wheatcroft provocatively claims that the Stalinist regime, faced with a severe shortfall in output, no prospect of outside aid, and 'dangerously low' stock levels pressed workers and employees in the rural areas harder than the peasantry.

Two generations on, the Moldovan famine remains a highly contentious and emotive issue in Moldova itself. As recently as 2006, the Moldovan legislature rejected an attempt to provide 'a political and legal appreciation' of the 1946-1947 Moldovan famine. Opposition deputies described the famine as 'premeditated', but the official line—from a pro-Moscow administration—was that while there was no denying that there had been a famine, it had 'a pragmatic explanation historically demonstrated: the difficult post-war period, the poor crops, and the drought'. And so communal tensions in present-day Moldova drive one side to absolve Stalin of all responsibility for the

famine.<sup>3</sup> The same tensions also drive discussions of famine in Ukraine in 1932-33.

One aspect of the Moldovan famine that makes its memory more fraught is the gruesome suggestion that 'the eating of corpses took place on a large scale'<sup>4</sup>. The authorities were aware of the practice—they even showed Alexei Kosygin, then a candidate politburo member and sent from Moscow to investigate, a corpse that had been prepared for eating—and sought to stamp it out. There were stories of murder-cannibalism, including one of 'a peasant woman from the village of Tambula', who had 'killed two of her four children, a girl of six and a boy of five, with a view to eating them', and 'another peasant from the village of Cajba' who had 'killed his 12-year-old grandson who had come to visit and ate him'.

Cannibalism is famine's darkest secret, a taboo topic. How common was it in the past? I am not referring here to what scientist and historian Jared Diamond has dubbed 'customary cannibalism', i.e. the ceremonial or ritual consumption of human flesh in non-emergency situations, as distinct from cases of cannibalism during life-threatening food shortages. Our focus is on famine cannibalism. Of all the horrors of famine, this may be the most unsettling. Writing against the background of the Russian famine of 1921-22, which cost millions of

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<sup>3</sup>Ó Gráda, 'Famines past, famine's future'.

<sup>4</sup>Ellman 2000: 617fn1; 'The 1946-1947 famine in Bessarabia' (<http://assembly.coe.int/Main.asp?link=/Documents/WorkingDocs/Doc10/EDOC12173.htm>; downloaded 23 January 2012).

lives and during which he claimed cannibalism was 'an ordinary occurrence', sociologist Pitirim Sorokin pointed out that the practice entailed the suppression not only of religious, moral, legal, and aesthetic reflexes, but also those related to group preservation (Sorokin 1975: 136). Much in the same vein, Danish anthropologist Kirsten Hastrup has argued that when famine results in cannibalism it has gone 'far beyond mensurational reach' to a level of 'hardship so extreme that humanity itself seems at stake' (Hastrup 1973: 730).

Hastrup did not distinguish 'survivor cannibalism'—survivors consuming the corpses of those who have already died—and what might be called 'murder cannibalism', i.e. murdering people for meat. During the Great North China Famine of 1876-78, in a widely reproduced letter the Catholic bishop of Shansi reported that 'until lately the starving people were content to feed on the dead; but now they are slaughtering the living for food'.<sup>5</sup> Catherine Edgerton-Tarpley (2008: 223) refers to three stock phrases regarding cannibalism which recur in gazetteers' accounts of the 1876-78 North China famine: 'people ate each other', 'exchanging children and eating them', and variants of 'people ate each other to the point that close kin destroyed each other'. In Russian, too, there are different words to describe murdering for food (*lyudoedstvo*) and corpse consumption (*trupoedstvo*) (Davies and Wheatcroft 2004: 421).

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<sup>5</sup> *New York Times*, 6 Jul 1878; *Otago Times*, 5 October 1878; see too 'Horrors of the Chinese famine', *Red Bank Register*, 25 July 1878.

As in the case of ritual cannibalism, the record on famine cannibalism is also contested. William Chester Jordan, historian of the Great Northern European Famine of the early fourteenth century, notes that references to famine cannibalism may act as a form of cliché to convey the 'stark horror' of famine conditions: 'to make a famine real, one had to include cannibalism in the story' (Jordan 1996: 149). And famine historian David Arnold dismisses most of the evidence for it as 'second-hand and hearsay' (1988: 19). Stories of famine cannibalism have also been invoked for pejorative purposes, as part of a narrative that demonizes 'outsiders'. Recurrent references to old women or 'hags' devouring children recall sinister narratives of witchcraft: and who believes in witches anymore?

Yet several well-known and well-documented historical episodes highlight how desperate people can be driven to cannibalism during life-threatening food emergencies. Examples (in chronological order) include:

- The surviving crew of the Nantucket whaling ship *Essex*, sunk by a sperm whale in the south Atlantic in 1820; they followed the custom of the sea whereby shipwrecked survivors drew lots to see who would be killed and eaten to enable the others survive.<sup>6</sup>
- The Donner party of American pioneers, some of whom resorted

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<sup>6</sup> Nathaniel Philbrick, *In the Heart of the Sea: the Tragedy of the Whaleship Essex* (New York: Penguin, 2001).



to cannibalism when stranded high in California's Sierra Nevada during the winter of 1846-47 (Grayson 1990);

- Explorer Sir John Franklin and his crew who met their deaths in attempting to find the Northwest Passage in 1847, and some of whom, according to contemporaneous accounts now backed by recent archaeological research, engaged in cannibalism (*Irish Times*, 'The American Franklin search expedition', 9 October 1880; Keenleyside *et al.* 1997).
- Tom Dudley and Edwin Stephens, survivors of another south Atlantic shipwreck over six decades later in 1884, whose trial for the cannibalistic murder of cabin boy Richard Parker gave rise to a celebrated judicial verdict rejecting the custom the sea as described above and denying, in effect, that necessity knew no law (Simpson 1984).<sup>7</sup> Another, less well-known instance of cannibalism at sea concerned the mainly Irish crew of the barque *Maria* of Belfast, dismasted in rough seas off the coast of west Africa in December 1876. The sole survivor, twenty year-old James McLinden of Kilkeel, explained how the last to die had attempted to survive on

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<sup>7</sup> Resort in the past to cannibalism in the wake of shipwrecks was seemingly not so unusual (see Fabel 1990: 9-10). I am grateful to Kevin O'Neill of Boston College for this reference.

the bodies of comrades who predeceased them.<sup>8</sup>

- Japanese troops in New Guinea towards the end of World War 2, as described in Kazuo Hara's disturbing 1987 documentary, 'The Emperor's Naked Army Marches On'. Prohibited from surrendering and cut off from food supply chains, some resorted to cannibalism. Several Japanese military were found guilty of sanctioning or engaging in cannibalism against civilian populations and enemy soldiers by the U.S. and Australian war crimes tribunals and executed for their crimes<sup>9</sup> (Stephens 2007). Survivor cannibalism also features in *Fires on the Plain*, the 1951 novel by Ooka Shohei about a lone soldier in the Philippines at the end of World War 2.
- In Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in 1943-45 cannibalism compounded, if that were possible, the horrors of the Holocaust.<sup>10</sup>
- The survivors of the crash of Uruguayan Air Force Flight 571 in the high Andes in 1973. Some initially refused to resort to cannibalism, but relented after a few days when all other

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<sup>8</sup> *Irish Times*, 'Horrible story of cannibalism at sea', 3 Mar 1877. See also *Irish Times*, 'A terrible story of the sea. Shipwreck and cannibalism', 19 November 1888; *Irish Times*, 'Shocking story of cannibalism at sea', 9 September 1899.

<sup>9</sup> *Canberra Times*, 'Death for Jap who practiced cannibalism', 17 April 1946; *Canberra Times*, 'Jap officers to hang for cannibalism', 5 October 1946.

<sup>10</sup> *The Guardian*, 19 April 1945, 'Cannibalism in Prison Camp: British Medical Officer's Visit to 'Most Horrible Place''; *Toronto Daily Star*, 27 September 1945, 'Says cannibalism rampant at Belsen, saw 300 cases'; *Daytona Beach Morning Journal*, 29 September 1945, 'Cannibalism at Belsen described'.

food supplies were exhausted (Read 1974).

I do not include the case of recently arrived colonists in Jamestown, Virginia who—so it was claimed—‘driven thru insufferable hunger to eat those things which nature most abhorred’, resorted to cannibalism during the winter of 1609-10, because this particular instance, long accepted, has recently been contested (Zinn 2003: 24; Herrmann 2011). I also exclude an account from Athens during the famine of 1941-42, where cannibalism is a plausible inference, but unproven<sup>11</sup>.

While never widespread and never responsible for more than a miniscule fraction of famine deaths, references to famine cannibalism recur throughout history (Ó Gráda 2009: 63-68). Like much else about famine, it is mentioned in the Old Testament. Conditions during the Syrian siege of Samaria in the ninth century BC were so severe that ‘a donkey’s head was sold for eighty pieces of silver, and the fourth part of a *kab* (or pint) of wild onions for five pieces of silver’ (2 Kings 6: 25-28, as cited in Ó Gráda 2009: 63). And 2 Kings 6 continues:<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> ‘And it is certain that if private initiative had not reached the extent it did with the popular soup kitchens and the fight for survival, the problem of hunger would have taken such dimensions of primitiveness and barbarity, that even cannibalism would end up being a common phenomenon... The horrific picture of the corpse of a girl whose left thigh was missing made an impression on E. E. who writes, ‘It was cut so smoothly that someone must have cut it with a knife. The thought made me feel sick. That is what made the biggest impression on me during the Occupation/famine’ (Skouras *et al.* 348). I am grateful to Violetta Hionidou for the translation.

<sup>12</sup> And there is more along the same lines in Deuteronomy 28: 53-57, describing the effects of another siege in the seventh century BC. Interestingly, the

And as the king of Israel was passing by on the wall, a woman cried to him, saying, 'Help, my lord, O king'. And he said, 'If the Lord doesn't help you, how can I help you? Out of the barn floor, or out of the winepress?' And the king said to her, 'What ails you?' And she answered, 'this woman said to me, Give your son, so that we may eat him today, and we'll eat my son tomorrow. So we boiled my son, and ate him: and I said to her on the next day, Give your son, so that we may eat him: and she has hid her son'.

The reluctance of mothers to kill their own children in such circumstances is a theme repeated in later accounts.

References to famine cannibalism thereafter range from an account from Edessa (present-day Şanlıurfa in southeastern Turkey) in 503-4AD, where the local general executed those guilty of murdering for food but gave leave to eat the corpses of the dead 'and this they did openly, eating the flesh of dead men', to an account describing Egypt in the early 1200s, when at first it 'formed the subject of every conversation' but 'eventually people grew accustomed, and [made] these detestable meats ... their ordinary provender'; and from stories of mothers eating their own children during the apocalyptic Ethiopian famine of 1889-91 to a case in war-torn Scotland in 1341AD when 'the starving sufferers were compelled to feed on substances most

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account in Kings informs the Gaelic text from the 1830s edited by Buttimer (1997: 60-61, 63-4).

abhorrent to human appetite; and one wretch called Christian Cleik, with his wife, subsisted on the flesh of children whom they caught in traps and devoured. These wretched cannibals were detected, condemned, and burned to death'.<sup>13</sup>

Not all accounts are equally plausible. A striking feature of some is their rather non-judgmental tone. Accounts of famine cannibalism often display an understanding, if not outright empathy, towards those engaging in the practice. In Hara's 1987 documentary former soldier Kenzo Okuzaki more than once stated that he did not condemn the perpetrators, but 'those who put them in that situation'.

The cameos of cannibalism described above refer to localized crises: what of major famines? At the height of the Soviet famine of 1920-22 cases of both kinds of cannibalism were well documented; indeed, an officially sanctioned exhibition close to the Kremlin highlighted the urgency of the situation with gruesome images of it. Communist Party newspapers carried reports of it for their shock value, and a poster on display in Moscow read 'these people who eat their dead because they are hungry are not cannibals; the cannibals are those who do not give their surplus to the hungry'.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Wright 1882: 62; Ó Gráda, *Famine*; Tannehill, *Flesh and Blood: A History of the Cannibal Complex* (citing an Egyptian source); Stathakopoulos, *Famine and Pestilence*; Sir Walter Scott, *History of Scotland*, vol. 1, ch. 13; Pankhurst, *Ethiopia*.

<sup>14</sup> Sorokin 1975: 136; Patenaude 2002: 262-70, 332; 'Cannibalism still prevails in Volga famine districts', *New York Times*, 29 May 1922; *Quebec Daily Telegraph*, 30 May 1922. Lenin sought to exploit the descent into cannibalism

A decade later, during Stalin's collectivization famine, there were reports of murder cannibalism too:

Every day there were cases of cannibalism. Mothers killed their children and ate them up. In such villages as Kordyshivka, Soshenske, [and] Pytiiv, cannibalism was very widespread. It was awfully dangerous for a person who looked good to go there. I don't know why people change so much. Ukrainians are very generous and very kind people, but during that hunger they looked like wolves.<sup>15</sup>

In a March 1933 survey of forty-two districts in Ukraine in which starvation was rife, the Kiev secret police listed seventy-two cases of *lyudoedstvo* (murder cannibalism) and sixty-five of *truploedstvo* (corpse consumption) (Davies and Wheatcroft 2004: 423). The authorities punished the former, though 'not nearly as severely as say the theft of a horse or a cow from a collective farm' (Dalrymple 1964: 269).

Again, evidence for cannibalism during the blockade-famine of Leningrad during World War II is plentiful. At the height of the crisis, between early December 1941 and mid-February 1942, nearly nine hundred people were arrested for unspecified crimes relating to cannibalism (Belozerov 2005: 223-24). Harsh repression and an

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as an excuse for expropriating of ecclesiastical property (Avramescu 2009: 232).

<sup>15</sup> Harvard Project on the Soviet Social System, Case 333 [available at: <http://pds.lib.harvard.edu/pds/view/5608007?n=25>]. See too NYT, 28 February 1922 (report by Walter Duranty); *New York Times*, 'Starving eat dead, Soviet told', 29 December 1921; Davies and Wheatcroft 2004: 422.

attenuation of the crisis reduced its incidence thereafter. In west Papua during World War 2 Japanese officers who engaged in cannibalism singled out 'unpopular soldiers', 'troublemakers and selfish ones'.

Finally, turning to the very recent past, histories of the Chinese Great Leap Forward famine of 1959-61, most notably Yang Jisheng's *Tombstone*, have highlighted incidents of cannibalism. Inconclusive about its extent, another high-profile account claims that 'in the midst of state-sponsored violence... necrophagy was neither the most common nor the most widespread way of degrading a human being' (Dikötter 2010: 323). But famine cannibalism was nothing new in China in 1959-1961. Instances were reported in Henan in 1942, in Sichuan in 1936, in Gansu in 1929, in Shansi during the Boxer rebellion in 1900, in northern China during the 'incredible' famine of 1876-78, and in Nanking in 1861.<sup>16</sup>

And yet, although cannibalism is a recurring feature of accounts of famine, by no means all famines led to it (Keys *et al.* 1950; Brun 1980). Thierry Brun guards against lumping all famines together in a quest for universal patterns, and notes in particular that the atmosphere of despair and cruelty which was linked to cannibalism during the Soviet famine of 1920-22 is absent in the Biafra famine of the

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<sup>16</sup> *Irish Times*, 'Cannibalism in China', 20 April 1929; Li 2007: 304; *Los Angeles Times*, 'Human flesh sold in Chinese markets', 19 Dec 1900; Edgerton-Tarpley 2008; *Irish Times*, 'The famine in China', 29 June 1878; *Times of India*, 'War and famine', 8 October 1861.

late 1960s and also the Sahel famine of 1972-73. There is no evidence for it during the Great Bengal Famine of 1943-44, for example, but not all nineteenth-century Indian famines seem to have been free of it.<sup>17</sup>

More recent famines in sub-Saharan Africa have yielded little evidence of cannibalism either. True, the official responsible for relief during the Ethiopian famine of 1984-85 told Australian novelist Thomas Keneally that he had witnessed cannibalism 'in an inadequate feeding centre in the Ethiopian highlands', for which (according to his informant) 'these people were not to blame'. But cannibalism does not feature in accounts of major famines in the Sahel, in Biafra, and elsewhere (Keneally 2010; Ó Gráda 2009: 67-68; Rahmoto 1991).

## 2. *Lucht Feola Daoine a lthe?*

So what of Ireland? As Nicholas Canny (1973: 587; compare Ó Drisceoil 2001) noted long ago, dubbing the native Irish 'canyballs' was a feature of early English colonialist rhetoric. The allegation has a much older history: in *Foras Feasa ar Éirinn* Seathrún Céitinn (c. 1569-c. 1644) traced it back to the Greek geographer Strabo (63BC-24AD). Strabo was an unreliable witness: he admitted to knowing little about Ireland (or Ierne) 'except that the inhabitants are more savage than the Britons, since they are man-eaters as well as heavy eaters', and that they 'count it as an honourable thing, when their fathers die, to devour

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<sup>17</sup> *Irish Times*, 'The Indian famine: an alleged case of cannibalism', 30 August 1877.



them'. However, he confessed to writing this 'on the understanding that I have no trustworthy witnesses for it' (as cited in Killeen 1976: 209; see too O'Brien 2001).<sup>18</sup>

Céitinn based his rejection of Strabo's accusation that the Irish were cannibals ('*gurab lucht feola daoine d'ithe na h-Éireannaigh*') on the lack of references to cannibalism in the old Gaelic sources ('*óir ní léaghtar i san Seanchus go raibhe neach i n-Éirinn riamh ler' cleachtadh feoil daoine d'ithe...*').<sup>19</sup> Our concern here is not human sacrifice (on which see compare Robinson 1913; Borsje 2004, 2007) but famine cannibalism. And if references to the latter are evidence, then Céitinn was clearly incorrect. The issue is whether the references in the annals and elsewhere should be taken literally.

The earliest Irish mention of famine cannibalism that I could find refers to 698-700AD, when according to the medieval *Chronicon Scotorum*, '*fames et pestilentia iii annis in Hibernia facta est, ut homo hominem comederet* (famine and disease raged for three years in Ireland so that man ate man)'. There is a hint of cannibalism too in the

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<sup>18</sup> Elizabethan poet Edmund Spenser was present at the horrific execution of the 'notable traitor' Murrough O'Brien in Limerick in 1577, where he saw O'Brien's foster-mother 'take up his head whilst he was quartered and suck... up all the blood running thereout, saying the earth was not worthy to drink it' (O'Brien 2001: 37). But Spenser's depiction of this as an example of ritualistic Irish savagery hardly carries conviction. If this was ritual cannibalism, then Eibhlín Dhubh Ní Chonaill's instinctive reaction on finding her husband's bloodied body—'*níor fhanas le hí ghlanadh ach í ól suas lem basaibh*' (I didn't wait to wipe off the blood but drank it up in with my cupped hands)—made her a cannibal too (compare Bourke 1993: 166).

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.ucc.ie/celt/online/G100054/>, chapter 2. He cites one scandalous exception, which related to 'the pagan era'.

*Fragmentary Annals of Ireland's* entry for 700AD, which refers to 'the greatest famine, in which men were reduced to unmentionable foods'.<sup>20</sup>

The *Chronicon Scotorum's* entry for 1116AD notes that in the wake of an attack on Thomond by Toirdhealbach Ó Conchubhair 'Gorta mor isin errach go recad an fer a mac & a ingin ar biadh & go n-ithdís na daoine cidh a chéle ann & na coin. Fasughadh Laigen uile (acht beg) & a sgaoiledh fo Eirinn ar gorta (Great famine in the spring so that a man would sell his son and his daughter for food and men would even eat one another, and dogs. All Leinster was almost emptied, and scattered throughout Ireland on account of the famine).'<sup>21</sup> The sale of children is a recurrent feature of famine history, but the reference to cannibalism here does not imply that children were being sold for consumption. Cannibalism was also recorded in the mid-1310s during Robert the Bruce's Irish campaign: 'do ithdais na daine cin amuras a cheli ar fod Erenn (and undoubtedly men ate each other in Ireland)' (*Annála Connacht* 1944: 252-3; Sayles 1956: 95), when warfare exacerbated the impact of dismal harvests.

Edmund Spenser's *View of the Present State of Ireland*, describing Munster in the 1580s, reported that 'they (the surrendering rebels) looked like anatomyes of death, they spake like ghostes crying out of

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<sup>20</sup> Gearóid Mac Niocaill, ed, *Chronicon Scotorum* (<http://www.ucc.ie/celt/published/G100016/index.html>); *Fragmentary Annals of Ireland* (<http://www.ucc.ie/celt/online/T100017.html>).

<sup>21</sup> <http://www.ucc.ie/celt/published/G100016/index.html>.

theyr graves; they did eat of the dead carrions, happy where they yf they could finde them, yea, and one another soone after...'

Admittedly, Spenser's claim may have been based on hearsay, although he was in Ireland at the time. Less than two decades later Fynes Morison wrote of war-induced famine in County Down towards the end of the Nine Years War:<sup>22</sup>

Captain Trevor and many honest gentlemen lying in the Newry can witness, that some old women of those parts used to make a fire in the fields, and divers little children driving out the cattle in cold mornings, and coming thither to warm them, were by them surprised, killed and eaten, which at last was discovered by a great girl breaking from them by strength of her body, and Captain Trevor sending out soldiers to know the truth, they found the children's skulls and bones, and apprehended the old women, who were executed for the fact.

Shades of Hanzl and Gretl, perhaps! A later commentator, more sympathetic to the old women, did not deny their deed but added: 'The authors of the famine were the authors of cannibalism, not the unfortunate hags, who were driven by the extremity of hunger to that shocking sustenance' (Taaffe 1801: II, 101). In a reversal of the 'hags' motif, Moryson also wrote of 'a most horrible Spectacle of three

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<sup>22</sup> Fynes Moryson, widely cited, e.g. in Dennis Taaffe, *An Impartial History from the Period of the English Invasion to 1810* (Dublin: Christie), vol. 2, pp. 100-101; also Wittkovsky 1943: 92-3. See too Quinn, *The Elizabethans and the Irish*, pp. 139-40.

Children (whereof the eldest was not above ten Years old,) all eating and gnawing with their Teeth the Entrails of their dead Mother, upon whose Flesh they had fed 20 Days past' (as cited in Wittkowsky 1943: 93). Again, a little skepticism seems appropriate here; surely it would have taken less than twenty days for flesh to rot?

Nor was the discourse purely a colonialist one. Tarlach Ó Mealláin, a Franciscan friar, kept a *cín lae* (diary) while on the run during the early stages of the Confederate Wars in Ulster in 1643. This was a time of widespread famine (Smyth 2006: 161). Ó Mealláin's reference to cannibalism is probably to corpse consumption (Dillon 2000: 350):

It was also resolved that whoever should steal a cow or horse, steed or gelding, sheep or goat or the value of any of these, would have a like amount confiscated from him, if he were a man of means; or hanged, if he were a man of no means... Many other fine decisions were made. There are people in the country, Ó Catháins, O'Devlins, O'Haras (*muintir Ára*), and the people of Iveagh, all of Clondeboy and the Route [reduced to] eating horses and steeds; the end of spring; stealing; carrying off cats; dogs; eating humans [corpses?]; rotten leather (*leathar carbaidhí*); and undressed leather (*leathar fo na aon*).<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup>For the original see Ó Donnchadha (1931), who remarks that the cryptic nature of the text may imply that Ó Mealláin may have intended to build on it at a later stage.

The following excerpt from the May 1645 deposition by one Peter Hill of County Down recalls Fynes Moryson's account of the same county some four decades earlier<sup>24</sup>:

That since the Rebellion began but especially for a year and above now last past it hath been a very common & ordinary thing for the Irish to murder, devour, and eat the persons of such English as they could light upon, and when they could light upon none of them then to kill devour and eat one another. And about one year now since there was brought to this deponent at his house called Ballyhornan an Irish woman for wounding & attempting to kill another Irish woman and her child which woman so accused & brought before him upon her examination confessed that she had hurt (but had an intent to have killed) the other woman and her child, and to have eaten the child, whereupon & because he was credibly informed that such a like fat woman had killed and devoured divers others, he this deponent caused her to be hanged... About the time aforesaid viz. a year since three troopers under the Lord Conway's command going out for Lisnegarvie over the River into the County of Down with their horses about 2 miles off to fetch home grass were suddenly surprised by some of the Irish together with their horses which three troopers were then and there murdered, and afterwards their flesh eaten and devoured by divers barbarous Irish women that lay in the woods. And the very bones of those men were afterwards found in the woods clean picked and the flesh (first as was *conceived* boiled) eaten quite off the same.

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<sup>24</sup> <http://1641.tcd.ie/deposition.php?deplD=837030r020>, spelling modernized.

Even after discounting for its strong sectarian tone<sup>25</sup>, this rather sounds like famine cannibalism. There is a claim that people also resorted to cannibalism in 1652-53, again a time of severe famine (Lenihan 1997): Richard Lawrence was 'credibly informed that they digged Corps out of the Grave to eat', and described an eye-witness account of old women and children eating such a corpse<sup>26</sup>. Again, what credence do we place in 'credibly informed'? Note that all the above instances except (perhaps) the first occurred during periods of civil war or colonial conquest.<sup>27</sup>

There is no evidence for cannibalism during the famine of 1728-30<sup>28</sup>, nor during the much more serious famine of 1740-41. Our next mention of cannibalism in Ireland turns out to have been bogus, but is worth describing as an example of how elusive evidence for cannibalism can be. It relates to an incident in Wexford in the wake of the 1798 Rising as described by Sir Jonah Barrington (ch. XXII):

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<sup>25</sup> On interpreting the depositions see Fennell (2011).

<sup>26</sup> Richard Lawrence (1682: pt. 2, 86-87). I am grateful to Breandán Mac Suibhne for this reference.

<sup>27</sup> It was reported that the height of the siege in Derry in 1689 'a corpulent gentleman, who, conceiving that some of the garrison in the extremity of their hunger looked at him with rather a longing eye, hid himself for three days, till the cannibal desire might have time to subside' (Thomas Witherow, *Derry and Enniskillen in the Year 1689*, Belfast: Mullan & Sons, p. 184: available online at: [http://www.archive.org/stream/derryenniskillen00withrich/derryenniskillen00withrich\\_djvu.txt](http://www.archive.org/stream/derryenniskillen00withrich/derryenniskillen00withrich_djvu.txt)).

<sup>28</sup> This crisis have prompted Jonathan Swift's *A Modest Proposal for Preventing the Children of Poor People in Ireland From Being a Burden to Their Parents or Country, and for Making Them Beneficial to the Public*. However, Swift is more likely to have been inspired by Fynes Moryson's depiction of the horrors on the Nine Years War than by events in his own day (Wittkowsky 1943: 92-3).

During the rebellion... Mr. Waddy, a violent loyalist... fled to a castle at a considerable distance from the town of Wexford... Here [he] concealed himself, and everybody was for a long time utterly ignorant as to his fate... At length, it occurred to certain of his friends, to seek him through the country... Their search was in vain, until approaching by chance the old castle, they became aware of a stench, which the seekers conjectured to proceed from the putrid corpse of murdered Waddy. On getting nearer this opinion was confirmed, for a dead body lay half within and half without the castle, which the descent of the portcullis had cut nearly into equal portions... [T]o their infinite astonishment, they perceived it was *not* Waddy, but a neighbouring priest who had been so expertly cut in two; how the accident had happened nobody could surmise... [T]he other half of the priest was discovered immediately within the entrance, but by no means in equally good condition with that outside; inasmuch as it appeared that numerous collops and rump-steaks had been cut off the reverend gentleman's hindquarters by Waddy who early one morning had found the priest thus divided; and being alike unable to raise the portcullis or get out to look for food, certain indeed, in the latter ease, of being piked by any of the rebels who knew him, he thought it better to feed on the priest, and remain in the castle till fortune smiled, than run a risk of breaking all his bones by dropping from the battlements, his only alternative.

It turns out, however, that Barrington, writing two decades after the event, was being his usual unreliable self. Contemporary accounts<sup>29</sup> make it clear that there was no cannibalism involved. The castle at

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<sup>29</sup> *London Chronicle*, 3 January 1800, on the basis of a report in the *Dublin Journal*, 27 December 1799; *Freeman's Journal* 31 December 1799; Whelan 1987.

Clough East to which ultra-loyalist Richard Waddy, a prosecution witness in the trial of rebel leader Bagenal Harvey, fled was his own home. He was not starving. The priest was John Byrne, a Carmelite friar from Goff's Bridge near Taghmon who had been 'a very zealous and active rebel' in 1798. 'A drinking, giddy man', Byrne had been asked to leave Ferns diocese by his bishop during the Rising and threatened with suspension. How come in December 1799 he found himself at Waddy's table remains a mystery. An altercation between the two men followed an alcohol-fuelled dinner. It was said that Byrne, believing that he had killed his host, was trying to escape when Waddy let the portcullis that shielded him from intruders drop, virtually severing the friar's body. Next morning Waddy's servants found the corpse, and a few days later an inquest jury returned a verdict of 'accidental' on Byrne's death. So, for whatever reason, Barrington invented Richard Waddy's cannibalism.

What of the Great Famine of the 1840s? In an unpublished paper Perry Curtis has commented that 'the silences surrounding cannibalism are almost deafening enough to arouse suspicion' (Curtis 1999: 14).

What of the 1840s? Joe Lee (1997: 168) has noted:

There was also of course a great deal of psychic decomposition, even right down to some cases of cannibalism, even, or especially, cannibalism in one's own family. It was, as far as we can tell, of the



deranged, of those who were themselves victims,  
driven mad by hunger.

Metaphorical references, such as Thomas Carlyle's account of a gombeenman who had 'prospered ... by workhouse grocery-and-meal trade, by secret pawnbroking—by eating the slain', or John Mitchel's gothic depiction of the workhouse in Glenties as 'the fortress of Giant Despair, whereinto he draws them one by one, and devours them there' (Carlyle 1882: 160; Mitchel 1873: 212), capture the horrors of the famine but prove nothing about cannibalism.

But Mitchel's reference to 'insane mothers [who] began to eat their young children, who died of famine before them' is in a different league. So too is the reference in John de Jean Frazer's obscure poem, 'The Three Angels', first published in *The Cork Magazine* in August 1848 and reprinted in Chris Morash's *The Hungry Voice* (1989: 181-7, ll. 252-7):<sup>30</sup>

Some gathered their kith to a distant land;  
Themselves, and their kindred, thro- sheer despair,  
Some slew, in belief that *to slay was to spare!*  
A cannibal fierceness but ill-suppressed  
In many—made some—we must veil the rest!

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<sup>30</sup> Thanks to Melissa Fegan for alerting me to this reference.

Novelist William Carleton's *Red Hall* (1852: II, 34-35, 51), later reissued as *The Black Baronet*, and *The Squanders of Castle Squander*, (1852: II, 265-69) both novels written during the Great Famine, also refer to literal cannibalism:<sup>31</sup>

...fathers have been known to make a wolfish meal upon the dead bodies of their own offspring. We might, therefore, be carried on our own description up to the very highest point of imaginable horror, without going beyond the truth.

On Saturday, the 25<sup>th</sup> inst., a tender and affectionate father, stuffed by so many cubic feet of cold wind, foul air, all resulting from extermination and the benevolence of a humane landlord, will, in the very wantonness of repletion, feed upon the dead body of his own child—for which entertaining performance he will have the satisfaction, subsequently, of enacting with the success the interesting character of a felon, and be benevolently lodged in the gaol of the county.

*The Squanders of Castle Squander* devotes a few pages to describing a father who made a meal of his dead son (II 265-69). It is likely, as Melissa Fegan (2002: 152-3) notes, that this account (and possibly also Mitchel's claim) were inspired by press reports of one of

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<sup>31</sup> I am very grateful to Melissa Fegan for advice on Carleton and for alerting me to the account in *Castle Squander*.

two incidents involving corpse consumption in Galway a few years earlier, to which I now turn.

In May 1849 Rev. James Anderson, rector of Ballinrobe in County Mayo, wrote a long open letter to prime minister Lord John Russell, in the course of which he described a starving man who had extracted the heart and liver from a ship-wrecked corpse 'and *that* was the maddening feast on which he regaled himself and his family'. Anderson's letter was widely reported in the press and raised in the House of Commons by Henry Arthur Herbert, M.P. for Kerry.<sup>32</sup>

Russell felt compelled to reply in some detail to the charge of famine-induced cannibalism.<sup>33</sup> In his statement to the House of Commons he revealed that the alleged incident had occurred the previous November in the Clifden union and claimed that the culprit was a well-fed labourer 'of singularly voracious appetite... not at all suffering from distress himself' (although two of his sisters were on relief). Initially, according to Russell, the 'cannibal' did not identify the corpse as human, but on being apprised of this by neighbours, 'it does not appear that he ate any portion of the flesh, whatever his original intention might have been'. Russell's disingenuous statement was widely reported,<sup>34</sup> and was the focus of a long rebuttal in the *Freeman's Journal* and a further letter from Rev. Anderson. The

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<sup>32</sup> H.C. Debates, 25 May 1849, vol. 105, col. 978.

<sup>33</sup> H.C. Debates, 1 June 1849, vol. 105, cols. 1033-4.

<sup>34</sup> E.g. *Trewman's Exeter Flying Post or Plymouth and Cornish Advertiser* (Exeter, England), 7 June 1849; *Scotsman*, 2 June 1849.

*Freeman's* protested that the only detail on which Anderson had erred was on 'the eating of the putrid heart', and took particular exception to Russell's assertion that 'the Clifden cannibal', one Patrick Diamond<sup>35</sup>, was well fed or, as claimed by the *London Times*, 'a fat man'<sup>36</sup>:

Patrick Diamond, the fat labourer, must be as great a curiosity as the extinct *Dodo*. We believe he is the only man of his race on whom a pound of Indian meal per diem has raised the thick coat of fat which gives the *Times* the power of triumphant refutation. Such miraculous obesity cut away the ground from the Rev. Mr. Anderson, and raises the presumption that all the Irish are shamming... But, after all, it did appear that Diamond did cut out the heart—nay more, that this 'fat and well-fed labourer' did meditate the eating thereof until he was told, what his eyes must plainly have told him before, that the trunk was that of a human body! This could not well be got over, and how is it explained? Well, by another fact of equal singularity with the fabulous fatness—that Diamond had a most voracious appetite, and of such abnormal irregularity, that he would devour rank weeds or green grass to satisfy its enormous cravings! We leave this satisfactory explanation untouched. Is there a human being, Lord John and the *Times* inclusive, who believes it?

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<sup>35</sup> Might this be Patrick Diamond (born Rusheen, County Galway, 1814; died Fountainhill, Co. Galway, 1894) [<http://www.mcdade.bravepages.com/i77.html#i27617>]?

<sup>36</sup> *Freeman's Journal*, July 4 1849; *Anglo-Celt*, (second) letter from Rev Anderson to Lord John Russell, June 8 1849; *Nenagh Guardian*, (third) letter from Rev Anderson to Lord John Russell, June 13 1849.

Which is the less plausible, Patrick Diamond's girth or his failure to distinguish the corpse as human? James Anderson was firmly convinced that Diamond knew what he was doing, and the Catholic curate of Spiddal reassured Anderson that he had told 'a tale, alas, too familiar here'. But what actually transpired is rather lost in the 'spin' of the different reports.

Another instance, the likely inspiration for Carleton's account, is harder to discredit.<sup>37</sup> It refers to another Connemara man, one John Connelly, who had been convicted of sheep-stealing and sentenced to three months hard labour, since 'an end should be put to such practices or that no man's property could be safe'. The sentence prompted a resident magistrate to intervene:

Mr. Dopping, Resident magistrate, stood up and addressing the Court said, that he felt bound to explain to the Court that he knew of this case. He had been told that the prisoner and his family were starving when this offence had been committed. One of his children had died and he had been credibly informed that the mother ate part of its legs and feet after its death. He had the body exhumed and found that nothing but the bones remained of its legs and feet. A thrill of horror pervaded the court at this announcement. There was deep silence for several minutes, during which time many a tear trickled down the

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<sup>37</sup> In this second letter on the Diamond case (*Anglo-Celt*, June 8 1849) Anderson also referred to this episode.

cheeks of those present. Even the court wept. The prisoner was instantly discharged.<sup>38</sup>

In their sympathy for the accused, perhaps John Dopping and those who wept in the courtroom showed a better understanding of famine than those who would seek to deny the possibility of famine cannibalism.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> *Galway Vindicator*, 1 April 1848, as cited in Langan-Egan (1999: 127). Also *Nenagh Guardian*, 8 April 1848. The case is also mentioned in *Census of Ireland for the Year 1851* (vol. 5[1], Tables of Death, pp. 243, 310) and in Keneally (2010).

<sup>39</sup> Again there is some ambiguity about this case. Kathleen Villiers-Tuthill suggests that the *Vindicator* may have been referring to an earlier story concerning one Bart Flaherty from Cill Chiaráin, who had claimed that his wife out of desperation had consumed parts of their two dead children. Their bodies were in too advanced state of decomposition when exhumed to provide conclusive evidence of cannibalism (Villiers-Tuthill 1997: 127-9).

A version of the same episode is re-cycled by Thomas Gallagher (1982: 112-3), and invoked in turn by Smart and Hutcheson (2008) and by Smart (2010):

In Belmullet, County Cork (*sic*), a starving woman lay in her hovel next to her dead three-year-old son, waiting for her husband to return from begging food. When night fell and his failure to return led her to imagine him dead in a ditch, she lay there in the faint light of the fire's dying embers, caressing with her eyes her dead son's face and his tiny fists, clenched as if for a fight to get into heaven. Then slowly, with death searching her, and now with her own fists clenched, she made one last effort to remain alive. Crawling as far away from her son's face as she could, as if to preserve his personality or least her memory of it, she came to his bare feet and proceeded to eat them.

When her husband returned and saw what had happened, he buried the child, went out, and was caught trying to steal food. At his trial, the magistrate from his immediate district intervened on his behalf, citing the wife's act as a circumstance deserving special consideration. The baby's body was exhumed, the flesh of both its feet and legs were found to have been gnawed to the bone, and the husband released and allowed to return to his wife.

I began by mentioning the difficulties posed by references to cannibalism in accounts of famine in the past. On the one hand, it is not always easy to distinguish between what can be attested and what seems plausible. Legal and standard documentary sources may sway us more readily than folk memory or biblical narratives. But is it fair to dismiss the latter as mere rhetorical devices?

On the other hand, the relative 'silence' on cannibalism in Ireland during the 1840s is no proof that it did not happen. The taboo against cannibalism meant that, when and if it occurred, it would have been furtive, all traces hidden by the perpetrators. And the same taboo would have inhibited others from recalling it. William Carleton's expressed unease about portraying cannibalism in *Castle Squander*, even though 'six or seven such scenes occurred in Ireland during the last four years' (1852b: II, 265), is interesting in this respect. Folklore about the Great Famine contains no evidence or even hints of it, although it is rife with mentions of famine foods, familiar and unfamiliar<sup>40</sup>. But perhaps folk memory's silence on human meat as famine food reflected twentieth-century sensitivities rather than nineteenth-century realities?

Seathrún Céitinn had his own reasons for treating cannibalism as a libel against the Irish race. His elision of awkward annalistic

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<sup>40</sup> Including sycamore seeds, watercress, horsemeat, dogmeat and dog soup, laurel berries, red clover, heather blossoms, dandelions, nettles, donkey's milk, silverweed, goose grass, and much else (Póirtéir 1995: 61, 64; 1996: 31-39, 46, 47).

references to cannibalism might be excused on the grounds that the contestability of many historical references is plain. Yet the hard evidence for both corpse consumption and murder-cannibalism in conditions of extreme famine in both twentieth-century Russia and China, and in the micro-historic anecdotes outlined at the outset of this talk, lend more credence to earlier less well-documented assertions. And, in fairness to Céitinn, they also qualify Jared Diamond's assertion, cited earlier, that 'Westerners abhor cannibalism'.<sup>41</sup>

This paper has been about one of humankind's darkest secrets. For reasons stated above, it is a place where, inevitably, empirical history must take a back seat to speculative inference. Still, a more reasonable response today to Céitinn's denial might be surprise at the paucity of hard evidence for famine cannibalism during the Great Famine, given that famine's truly massive scale by world-historical standards. By the 1840s a phenomenon linked to several earlier major Irish famines had become rare. Had some silent cultural shift or civilizing process<sup>42</sup> taken place that made a horrific practice long associated with extreme famine in Ireland virtually taboo?

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<sup>41</sup> Similarly, Brittlebank (1873: 95) referred to 'famine such as can be witnessed in Eastern lands'.

<sup>42</sup> In *Involvement and Detachment (Collected Works, vol. 8, 2007, p. 175)* Norbert Elias writes: 'It is true that people no longer hunt each other for food. Cannibalism, as well as slavery, has become rarer. But the way in which people kill, maim and torture each other in the course of their power struggles, their wars, revolutions and other violent conflicts, is different mainly in terms of the techniques used and the numbers of people concerned. ...' I am grateful to Stephen Mennell for this reference.



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