

communal self-definition through historical self-presentation. Heritage sites (in this case, museums and 'interpretative centres') must, in his view, be subjected to historical and cultural criticism to elucidate and interrogate their public meanings.<sup>4</sup> It follows that other sites where 'history' and 'heritage' intersect – such as the school classroom and the public monument – might equally be subjected to critical scrutiny.

This essay has two points of focus, both reflecting the preoccupations of a professional historian who is also engaged with the political contestations for which the Great Irish Famine stands as a metaphor. One focus is on the history of Famine 'memory' over the intervening century and a half; the second on the validity of the truth claims made about the Famine as part of the process of commemoration and the rhetorical forms through which these are articulated. In considering the latter, I am fully aware (as Lowenthal argues at length) that such claims serve functions far removed from the necessarily limited and conditional readings constructed by historians using critical methodology, but insofar as they also assert historical veracity and impinge on pedagogical processes, I believe heritage claims do lay themselves open to critical historical investigation.

At the same time, simply to dismiss commemorative and heritage-related appropriations of the past as subacademic myth-making is unhelpful. In a recent polemical essay, R.E. Foster gleefully exposed the commemorative excesses of 'Faminism' in 1990s Ireland, at the cost of caricaturing some elements and ignoring others less susceptible to revisionist ironising.<sup>5</sup> A less confrontational approach may throw some illumination both on the past and on its place in the present.

### What 'memory' did the Famine leave?

The memory of the Famine has always been a misnomer. Plural 'memories', or, perhaps more accurately, memorial traditions, reflecting the differing social experiences and interpretations of the 1845–50 disaster, were evident from its immediate aftermath. British and elite non-nationalist Irish 'memories' of the Famine – an event seen from a distance but in which the middle-class public as well as the political class was acutely interested – were, from the early 1850s, concerned with rationalising and normalising the crisis. Malthusian, providential, and euphemistic claims integrated it into a narrative of progress in the mid-nineteenth century; Ireland's inevitable modernisation became the underlying interpretation of the Famine inscribed in fiction, travel literature, and economic texts.<sup>6</sup>

The demographic effects of the Famine – forcing 1.8 million into emigration as well as killing around a million – had a profound effect in creating divergent Irish memories of the event. For Famine survivors in Ireland itself, remembering the Famine might serve rather different social functions (and thus take different forms) than for the Irish diaspora and elite groups. Regional and class differences within Ireland further complicate the idea of a uniform national 'memory' based on shared experience. These variations in the 'mental mapping' of the Famine allow for some overlap, but embody significant divergences.

The folk or 'living' memory of the Famine remains a controversial area.

## 4 Peter Gray Memory and the commemoration of the Great Irish Famine

In 1995 a cycle of commemorative activities to memorialise the Great Irish Famine of 1845–50 was initiated in Ireland, North America, Great Britain, and Australia. This transnational phenomenon owed its geographical range to the existence of an Irish diaspora that looked to the Famine for its foundation myth. While the specific forms and meanings of memorialisation varied between geographical contexts, there were some common themes: Irish and Irish-diasporic groupings sought simultaneously to focus on the meaning of Famine memory for national or ethnic identity, and to extract formal recognition of the historical suffering associated with the event from the British and other governments. This extensive commemorative emphasis on the 1840s catastrophe was largely unprecedented; the vigour and scope of the 1990s commemorations must be contrasted with the relative indifference that had greeted the centenary of the Famine in the 1940s. The 'public memory' articulated in recent years needs therefore to be interrogated for its contemporary motivations, its areas of contestation, and its relationship with both historical readings and popular traditions. The key questions posed by the commemorations – why now? and why in this form? – might be regarded as paralleling Peter Novick's interrogation of contemporary American 'Holocaust consciousness':<sup>1</sup>

The professional historian's role in commenting on these manifestations of 'public history' is not straightforward. Commemorative activities of this description might best be categorised as 'heritage', an arena with its own rules and perspectives frequently at odds with the ideals of professional historical practice. David Lowenthal suggests that heritage be regarded as a separate sphere in which the past is approached with a different agenda and focus from academic history, and recommends that historians leave it to its own devices.<sup>2</sup> Others are less confident. Eric Hobsbawm agrees that communal memory and forms of public memorialisation are inherently antithetical to the universalist ethos and methodological distancing he places at the heart of good historical practice, but argues that the parasitic relationship of heritage to history and the inability of historians to extract themselves from society imposes a duty of critical commentary on heritage forms.<sup>3</sup> In his study of Irish heritage sites, the art historian David Brett denies Lowenthal's duality, arguing that 'heritage' is, in effect, a contemporary mode of popular or non-specialist history, insofar as its role is that of

Explanations using such concepts as 'trauma' and 'shame' have been deployed to explain a perceived 'silence' in the folk tradition of Ireland itself. However, as Niall Ó Ciosáin has eloquently stated, the idea of 'silence' is problematic, and of relatively recent provenance.<sup>7</sup> The application of the language of psychoanalysis to national history – advocating the therapeutic and healing power of 'recovering' and 'remembering' a traumatic past – has made some inroads into Irish popular culture,<sup>8</sup> and has unquestionably been widely used in the language of commemoration, usually in such constructions as 'breaking the silence'. As an analytical concept, this is, however, deeply flawed, drawing on Freudian concepts that might be applicable to individual psyches but which pose profound difficulties when applied to the transgenerational imagined community of the 'nation'.<sup>9</sup>

Recent studies of the folklore relating to the Famine have revealed not silence, but a deeply textured and complex web of traditions that largely ignore the national narrative, while drawing together the specificities of locality and the interpretative structure of folk beliefs and practices.<sup>10</sup> Large amounts of folklore relating to the Famine were collected by the newly established Irish Folklore Commission (mostly from the children or grandchildren of survivors) in the late 1930s and mid-1940s. The framework of questioning was explicitly national-historic, and some collectors expressed frustration at the paucity of responses to such queries, but the thousands of pages of transcripts lodged in the archives (and left relatively untouched until recently) suggest not silence but forms of collective memory that had only a limited engagement with the romantic nationalist official ideology of the state or with literate textual constructions of the Famine.<sup>11</sup>

Ó Ciosáin suggests that it was the great increase in academic historical writing about the Famine, especially from the early 1980s, that gave rise to the idea of a 'silence' being broken. The role of academic production is obviously important, and will be returned to later, but there are other reasons why this theme of 'recovered memory' may have become so widespread in the Ireland of the 1990s.

Pierre Nora's theoretical perspectives on *les lieux de mémoire* are of use in constructing an explanation. Late twentieth-century Ireland presents a particularly acute case of what Nora describes as a process of 'memory sites' taking the place of the 'milieux' or 'environments' of memory typical of traditional (often peasant) communities bound together with communal traditions and 'living' memories.<sup>12</sup> The sheer scale and rapidity of Irish economic and social modernisation since the 1960s (accelerating markedly in the 1990s) has transformed it from a largely agrarian and emigration-dominated society on the periphery of Europe into one of the wealthiest and most dynamic economies in the EU, a country of net immigration and one facing social dislocations novel in its modern history. It is hardly coincidental that a society that has seen massive rural depopulation and rapid urbanisation should express consciousness of a loss of its traditional forms of memory (increasingly 'silent' to modern urbanites) at the same time as rushing headlong towards the creation of 'sites of memory' which are intended to capture and stabilise that disappearing past.

The same might be said, although to a lesser extent, of Irish-Americans. In the mid-nineteenth century, Irish Catholic immigrants were at the despised base of the

social pyramid in the northern states, crowded into heavily, if not exclusively, Irish urban concentrations. Shared memories of 'the Famine' and 'the crossing' (actual or inherited) contributed to an emerging sense of collective ethnic solidarity, and provided the moral idea of strength through shared suffering. Yet, in the course of the twentieth century, Catholic Irish-Americans have become statistically one of the most wealthy and politically powerful ethnic groups in American society. It is possible to detect in the language of those advocating the creation of Famine memorial sites in the 1990s, including the controversial high-school 'Famine' curricula and numerous high-profile urban monuments, an anxiety about 'loss of memory' as suburbanisation and atomisation appeared to weaken this collective identity and its defining myths.<sup>13</sup> These sites were surely intended by their promoters, in Nora's words, 'to stop time, to block the work of forgetting, to establish a state of things, to immortalize death, to materialize the immaterial'.<sup>14</sup>

Another factor in the novel focus on the Great Famine as a site of commemoration has been the increased uncertainty surrounding the traditional nationalist narrative of Irish history. The place of the Famine in this narrative was established in the decades following the catastrophe, and has been the subject of considerable historical study and criticism.<sup>15</sup> The greatest emphasis has been placed on the writings of exiled Young Irelanders, especially John Mitchel and Charles Gavan Duffy, in moulding the nationalist 'memory' of the Famine as a crime committed by a malevolent British government against the Irish people – indeed, Mitchel's claim that 'a million and a half of men, women and children were carefully, prudently and peacefully *slain* by the English government' is one of the central tenets of the nationalist interpretation.<sup>16</sup> It is sometimes overlooked by critics that this 'Mitchelite' perspective had its roots in the more widespread nationalist critique of Famine policy published in the Irish newspapers in the 1840s, and that it derived its power (especially in the diaspora) from its ability to give a coherent structure of meaning to the often horrific and alienating individual experiences of survivors. Whatever the reasons for its success, its influence from the mid-nineteenth century was considerable; the narrative told a tale of a people subjected to an artificial famine at the whim of a genocidal government, the victims of a great injustice that could only be redeemed through the victory of the nationalist movement in removing British rule in Ireland.<sup>17</sup>

Despite the polemical power of Mitchel's writings, the Famine always played a somewhat subordinate role in the nationalist narrative in both Ireland and Irish America. While the idea of 'undoing the work of the Famine' was employed in the mobilisation of the Irish rural classes during the Land War of 1879–82, the complex conflicts of interest in the countryside, and especially the fact that many Catholic large farmers and graziers had ultimately gained from the Famine's consequences, blunted its effectiveness as a rallying point. The simple fact that the dominant images of the Famine were inherently negative was also problematic. For more militant separatists, the Famine, while a useful 'proof' of British oppression, was unhappily associated with passivity and victimhood (and thus for many with what they regarded as femininity). Fenians and their republican successors preferred to promote and memorialise heroic masculine ideals of Irish militancy drawn from the past.<sup>18</sup> It is thus hardly surprising

that while the fiftieth anniversary of the Great Famine in the 1890s passed with little public notice, the centenary of the 1798 rising was the focus of a huge commemorative effort involving both constitutional and separatist nationalists in Ireland and Irish America.<sup>19</sup>

Significantly, the Famine's place in the national narrative remained almost exclusively textual – defined by the works of Mitchel and Canon John O'Rourke, and the poetry of Lady Wilde – and lacked the performative or ritual dimensions which infused other aspects of Irish nationalist expression, and in which Paul Connerton has located the core dynamic of collective memories.<sup>20</sup> As generations passed, individual or family traditions were transmitted orally, but the shared 'memory' of the catastrophe, comprehensible to the literate and Anglophone majorities in both Ireland and Irish America, was continually re-created by engagement with these texts and their derivatives. This points not to 'silence', but to a strongly held, narrow, and instrumental public 'memory', which, nevertheless, lacked the emotional resonances of other aspects of the nationalist canon as manifested in processions, pageants and public monuments.

This subordinated, even ambiguous, place of the Famine in the national narrative helps explain the low priority given to publicly commemorating its centenary in the 1940s. Eamon De Valera's government, perhaps unconsciously echoing the existing textual bias of Famine 'memory', commissioned an official volume of essays from professional historians – a troubled project whose history has been traced by Cormac Ó Gráda<sup>21</sup> – but the state's primary interest was in celebrating the centenary of the death of the Young Irelander and cultural nationalist hero Thomas Davis.<sup>22</sup> With independence achieved, and popular sovereignty incorporated into the 1937 constitution, publicly recollecting the poverty and shame of the Famine appeared less desirable than forwarding the drive to create an insular Gaelic and Catholic society in Ireland.

A number of developments in the later twentieth century – the drive for economic and social modernisation, the accession to the EEC in 1972 (and the enthusiastic pro-Europeanism in Ireland that have followed), the complex reaction to the Ulster troubles, and the ascendancy of revisionist historians hostile to nationalist 'myths' from the 1960s – have all served to undermine confidence in the Irish Republic in the previously widely accepted nationalist narrative. The contrast between the largely unreflective celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the Easter rising in 1966 and the muted and embarrassed seventy-fifth anniversary events of 1991 is well known; the 'recovery' of long-suppressed Irish 'memories' of the First World War probably less so.<sup>23</sup> The 1980s and 1990s have been decades of acute introspection in Irish historical writing and cultural criticism; the past is now vigorously contested territory in both academic and public debate. Despite evidence of an anti- (or post-) revisionist resurgence in academic writing, the nationalist narrative can no longer be simply assumed and reasserted. For Irish governments in particular, an era of Europeanism and cooperation with British governments in seeking joint resolution of the Northern problem, have raised the question of the usefulness of a national myth previously centred on the themes of militant anti-Britishness and insular Gaelic and Catholic identity.

### The Famine commemorations in Ireland

I want to turn now to how these ambiguities and themes have worked themselves out in the Great Famine commemorations of 1995–98. Given the sheer scale and variety of forms, this must perforce be merely an overview – I want therefore to sketch out some of the main areas of contestation and to look at a few case studies of 'sites of memory'. This survey is concerned primarily with Ireland, south and north, but is conscious that a complete picture cannot ignore comparisons with the diasporic context (especially in the United States).

The role of academic historiography in moulding the modern memory of the Famine is ambiguous. The neglect of the subject by the post-independence generations of professional historians is notorious; critics of Irish revisionism have denounced this as a deliberate repression of the catastrophic dimension of Irish history.<sup>24</sup> Only two major works on the subject appeared between independence and the 1980s. One, the commissioned collection edited by R.D. Edwards and T.D. Williams, while containing some useful essays, has been criticised for its cool, distant, and unengaged tone. The second, Cecil Woodham-Smith's *The Great Hunger* (1962), was dismissed by the historical establishment as amateur and populist. While deserving neither the exaggerated (and sensationalist) praise of some of its reviewers, nor the hostility of its worst critics (the book is carefully researched, if weak on economics and ideology), *The Great Hunger* had an unparalleled public impact. Never out of print since 1962, it is estimated to have sold more copies than any other work of Irish history. Woodham-Smith's graphic accounts of famine sufferings and careful indictment of administrators and ministers (although she avoids the Mitchelite charge of genocide) have probably done more to remould the 'memory' of the Famine on the part of the Irish reading public over the last four decades than any other source.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, one Irish minister took the trouble to praise it as an 'unvarnished overview' of the Famine in a 1997 statement.<sup>26</sup>

A more general revival of historical writing on the Famine began in the early 1980s. The key text was the American historian Joel Mokyr's *Why Ireland Starved* – an economic study of the Irish economy in the pre-Famine decades that undermined the paradigm of Malthusian inevitability and stressed the contingency (and the role of human agency) in the catastrophe. Subsequent research in economic history, especially by Cormac Ó Gráda, has taken this theme further, and stimulated historians of emigration, administration, and politics to look again at the crisis. The outpouring of academic writing in the 1990s has been broadly post-revisionist in thrust (and thus to some degree at odds with what is still the dominant tone in Irish historiography). The broader impact of this is difficult to gauge, but the demand for more popular texts informed by this academic revival has demonstrated tremendous interest in the wider public.<sup>27</sup> The broadcasters RTE, the BBC, and in America PBS have all broadcast commemorative documentary series drawing on the work of this generation of scholars. At the same time, there has been an explosion of often high-quality local studies by amateur historians and local groups conscious of the recent developments in academic writing.

This academic revival has had some impact on stimulating public consciousness of the Great Famine, but by its very nature it has failed to satisfy some of the very demands thus created. Historians tend to render the narrative of the Famine into complex and sometimes contradictory forms, muddying in the process the simple political and moral message of the nationalist tradition; their conclusions are self-consciously conditional and tentative and hence unsatisfactory for those requiring certain and transcendent 'truths' about the past. Their evidence is fragmentary and often opaque. Individual experience is, at best, caught only in glimpses circumscribed by language and the perspectives of privileged witnesses. Frustration at these limitations in the broader public can produce some interesting phenomena.

One of the oddest affairs in the lead up to the Famine commemorations was the extraordinary publishing success of *Famine Diary: Journey to a New World*. Published in Dublin in 1991, this text purported to be the edited diary of Gerald Keegan, a Sligo schoolteacher who fled the Famine, only to die at the quarantine station of Grosse Île near Quebec in 1847. The book topped the Irish best-seller lists for months, was promoted in the media and by the Irish non-governmental organisations (NGOs), but was exposed in 1992 as a further fictive (indeed Michelite) rewriting of a short story in diary form published anonymously by the Canadian writer Robert Sellar in 1895.<sup>28</sup> It remains unclear whether the editor or the Irish publisher was responsible for the impostures implicit in the 1991 edition, but it reveals much about the continuing public demand for unmediated narrative 'voices' of the Famine that can satisfy the need to 'remember' without intellectual complications.<sup>29</sup> It is not unique in this respect. Hans Medick has described how a similarly fictive 'hunger chronicle' relating to the Würtemberg famine of 1816–17 became a popular *lieu de mémoire* in south Germany from the 1920s and was incorporated into other commemorative forms.<sup>30</sup>

The commemorative fixation of Ireland in the 1990s might be seen more broadly as a consequence of a reinvention or reconstruction of Irish identity in reaction to the questioning of the traditional nationalist narrative. This can be seen operating at a number of levels in politics, culture, and civil society – reflecting attempts to combine secularising and internationalising (or globalising) trends with the reassertion of a distinct Irish national heritage and moral perspective on the world. This self-presentation drew on some established images (the ideal of Ireland as a neutral 'moral' voice in world affairs can be traced to De Valera's rhetoric in the 1930s; Irish charitable self-images were rooted in attitudes towards missionary activities dating from the nineteenth century), but the emphasis was novel, and the memorial centrality of the Famine emerged as crucial.

The self-image of Ireland playing a characteristically leading role in the international politics of hunger came to prominence in the 1980s. The idea that the Irish had a distinct ability and responsibility to mediate between the rich North and poor South, and that this derived from its own history of colonisation and catastrophe, was increasingly promoted in the decade. The prominence of Irish popular musicians (especially Bob Geldof and U2) in organising and promoting the Live Aid campaign for famine relief and development from 1984, and their continuing role in the debt-

relief campaign, Jubilee 2000, appeared to signal the emergence of a new radical urban sense of 'Irishness' that ignored older nationalist pieties. Despite low levels of state overseas aid, the Irish contributed more per capita to such appeals than other European peoples – a cause for some self-congratulation, and, some would warn, a degree of national narcissism. A growing tendency by the 1990s to categorise Ireland (uniquely in Europe) as itself a post-colonial society, while drawing the fury of some academic commentators, added to this sense of redefinition.<sup>31</sup>

This case was enthusiastically taken up by the more radical Irish overseas-development NGOs, especially Concern and AFRl (Action from Ireland). In 1984, AFRl initiated its 'Great "Famine" Project' with the explicit intention of mobilising the 'memory' of the Irish Famine for contemporary charitable and campaigning purposes. Its objectives were to ensure that the 150th anniversary of Ireland's Great 'Famine' was commemorated in a dignified and challenging way, both nationally and internationally; publicly to honour Ireland's several hundred unmarked mass 'Famine' graves with dignity and reverence; and thirdly, to harness the memory of Ireland's Great 'Famine' experience as a window through which the Irish (at home and abroad) could better understand the cause and effect of poverty and hunger on the world's poor today – and to encourage an appropriate response.<sup>32</sup> Concern took on the responsibility of coordinating and publicising the commemorations of 1995–97 and lobbying the state and other official bodies for cooperation.

Both charities have been extremely active in pursuing their objectives in the 1990s, and were first into the field in the creation of monuments and the organisation of events explicitly internationalising the memory of famine (not least by the participation of representatives of oppressed social and ethnic groups as speakers). AFRl's annual 'famine walk' at Doolough in County Mayo (began in 1988 and later emulated in other localities) has taken on the form of a ritual of re-enactment, memorialising those who died on a vain journey to seek aid from relief officials in March 1849, while at the same time raising consciousness of contemporary injustices.<sup>33</sup> The language employed during many of the local commemorations from 1995 onwards suggests some considerable success on the part of the NGOs in reconstructing the meaning of the Famine and displacing (or at least subsuming) traditional nationalist readings.<sup>34</sup>

It would be churlish to criticise the work of the NGOs in raising consciousness about global injustice and poverty. At a political level, one can only applaud their success in externalising and giving an active meaning to Famine commemoration, particularly in the context of a society that is itself now firmly in the leading group of First World economies. There are, however, problems thrown up by this explicit appropriation of Famine memory for contemporary causes. While praising the NGOs for their efforts, Cormac Ó Gráda has questioned the widespread assumption of an unmediated 'collective memory' of famine as a motivating force in modern commemorations, and has undermined the case for simplistic analogies between the Irish and contemporary world famines.<sup>35</sup>

Don Mullan of Concern responded by arguing that academic historians have no more 'ownership' over the Famine than had the NGOs, a point which might be

irrefutable were it not for the fact (to which we will return) that some NGOs have themselves asserted superior ownership claims vis-à-vis both historians and other NGOs.<sup>36</sup> The dispute remains unresolved, but has left its mark in the commemorative record. AFRl in particular has made a point of always problematising the word 'Famine' in its publications and memorials, denying (wrongly, in my opinion) its validity to the Irish crisis of 1845–50. Examples of this and the internationalising agenda can be seen in two AFRl-sponsored memorials erected in 1994. The Doolough memorial (an unfinished stone Celtic cross by the roadside) combines the visual language of the sublime and the picturesque in form and setting; the Swinford workhouse cemetery memorial is more prosaic, but both carry highly instrumentalist text – the first also memorialising the striking Dunnes Stores workers who unveiled it; the second making explicit connections between anti-imperialist struggle in Ireland and India, and stressing the 'so-called' character of Ireland's 'Famine'.

The politics of naming are important here – it is not accidental that alternatives such as 'The Great Hunger', or 'The Great Starvation', or the Irish form *An Gorta Mór* have frequently been preferred. To question or deny the word 'Famine' is regarded by many as rejecting the inevitability or unavoidability of the catastrophe. This is an area where the traditional Mitchelite line that the Famine was a willed and artificial act of policy intersects uneasily with the radical-globalist case (informed by a popularised and universalised version of Amartya Sen's entitlement theory of famine causation) that all modern famines are the artificial consequences of market systems and unequal economic relationships.<sup>37</sup> Such globalising rhetoric leaves little room for examination of the historical specificities of the Irish case – perhaps legitimate in the polemical enthusiasm of humanitarian campaigning, but problematic with respect to a memorialisation process in which making justifiable truth-claims about the past is seen as essential.

Significant Famine commemorations might have remained restricted to parts of Irish civil society had it not been for an unexpected political development at the beginning of the decade. In 1990, Mary Robinson, a veteran campaigner for women's rights and civil liberties, was elected President as an independent (but decidedly left-wing) candidate. From early in her term of office, she grasped the contemporary importance of Famine commemoration in ways parallel to the NGOs, enthusiastically undertaking the role of patron of the proposed Famine Museum in 1991 at an early point in its gestation and encouraging the work of local historical groups.<sup>38</sup> The President's commitment to connecting the Irish Famine to contemporary famines was solidified by her unprecedented and deeply emotional visits to Somalia in the midst of the 1992 famine and to Rwanda in the wake of the 1994 massacres and threatened famine.<sup>39</sup> The Irish President's executive powers are strictly circumscribed, but Robinson seized the opportunity to exploit her office to set a number of agendas – one of which was an active and high-profile commemoration of the Famine and the internationalisation of its meaning. In a number of major speeches between her visit to Grosse Île in Canada in 1994 (itself suggested by AFRl as part of wider struggle to determine the meaning of that contentious site) and her retirement in 1997, she did her utmost to urge the use of the process of remembrance to connect us with the terrible realities

of our current world'.<sup>40</sup> To an outsider, this rhetoric might be mistaken for a self-regarding (even maudlin) assertion of ethnic 'mission', but it needs to be interpreted in the context of an increasingly savagely fought battle within the Irish political world over such issues as the rights of asylum seekers and immigrants, the overseas aid budget, and the social exclusion of those marginalised by the 'Celtic tiger' economy of the 1990s. This construction of the 'memory of famine' has become a potent political weapon in Irish political culture – a discursive construction with a grammar only partially cognate with that of academic history.<sup>41</sup>

There is little doubt that the enthusiastic leadership provided by President Robinson helped provide the political climate in which otherwise hesitant Irish governments accepted the need for official acts of commemoration. Much of what the Irish government eventually adopted as its commemoration programme was the outcome of lobbying by the NGOs in 1993–94. When an intergovernmental committee on the commemoration was established under Minister of State Tom Kitt in 1994 (succeeded after the change of government of that year by Avril Doyle), AFRl and other civil society groups, such as the Tullamore-based Great Famine Commemoration Committee, were invited to contribute at national and local level.<sup>42</sup>

The government's official commemorative publication, setting out the policy initiatives for 1995–97, thus did so explicitly in terms of internationalising and instrumentalising the memory of the Famine. Entitled *Ireland's Famine: Commemoration and Awareness*, it was produced in cooperation with the European Community Humanitarian Office and included surveys of Irish and European overseas development objectives alongside essays by historians. Meeting AFRl's demands in part, the government pledged additional expenditure on specific projects, including support for the Ethiopian government's national disaster prevention and preparedness project, a potato and maize seed improvement project in Eritrea, and a water supply project in Lesotho. In Ireland itself, a national memorial would be erected (John Behan's massive *Coffin Ship* bronze would eventually be unveiled at Murrisk in County Mayo in July 1997), and assistance would be provided to commemorative services, concerts, and exhibitions. Absent from the NGO wish-list, but significant to the government, was the expenditure of £115,000 on a historical research project into the local impact of the Famine led by a team of prominent Dublin-based historians. For ministers at least, suitable remembrance required some underpinning from professional historiography.<sup>43</sup>

The government's announcements did not save it from harsh criticism. The Fine Gael–Labour coalition in power from 1994 was attacked for downplaying and delaying the commemorations out of fear of their potentially negative impact on Anglo-Irish relations and concern that the issue could only add to Unionist–nationalist polarisation in Northern Ireland. This was rejected by the minister concerned, who pointed out that many of the events were scheduled for the 150th anniversary of the nadir of the Famine in 1997, but there is little doubt that the calls made for a British 'apology' by both Mary Robinson and the opposition leader Bertie Ahern were found politically embarrassing.<sup>44</sup> It was not until Prime Minister Tony Blair made his unexpected and inspired (if not uncontroversial) statement on historic British responsibility in June 1997 that this political problem was largely resolved.<sup>45</sup>

The occasion for Blair's statement, read alongside addresses by other world leaders during the 'Great Famine Event' at Millstreet, County Cork, itself reveals some of the contentions and uncertainties surrounding the public commemoration of catastrophe. The Millstreet 'Event' will be the first of four Irish case studies in which I will try to flesh these out. The 'Event' was organised collectively by the Great Irish Famine Trust and two Irish NGOs, the Big Issues Social Initiative (working to alleviate homelessness and social exclusion in Ireland) and GORTA (an overseas development charity), but also received financial and political support from the Irish and American governments. The prominence of Mary Robinson was intended to add gravitas – the lighting of a 'candle of remembrance' (echoed through a live video link in Washington, London, and other capitals) was to be the symbolic centre of the proceedings.

The central problem for the 'Event' was its yoking together of two contradictory agendas and their associated languages. The first was the secular ceremony of commemoration – a moment in which the nation and its diaspora would be united in solemnly remembering 'their' Famine dead. The second was a Live Aid style concert that would simultaneously raise money for the charitable organisations and serve (in the unfortunate words of its promoters) as a celebration of the triumph of the 'Irish spirit' over the adversities of Famine and diasporic dispersal. The latter would also, in a particularly unfortunate claim, act as a 'great wake' which would essentially 'bury the ghost' of the Famine. However laudable its intentions, the 'Event' was poorly conceived, and its image was worsened by a rather crass (and not hugely successful) advertising campaign to attract Irish-Americans.<sup>46</sup> Whether it deserved the extremity of reaction from some commentators is another matter. To Joe Murray of AFRi, the Event was 'dancing on the graves of the Famine dead'; to the columnist John Waters, it was evidence of both a depoliticising conspiracy on the part of the government and 'the ultimate betrayal of our sacred history'.<sup>47</sup> The Event was to some degree inadvertently rescued from its critics by the significance of Blair's 'apology' statement, but the controversy over precisely what was being commemorated, the tone in which this should be done, and the limits of instrumentalising memory for contemporary purposes was inflamed. Central to the problem were the difficulties a rapidly secularising (even post-Catholic) society faced in finding a novel language and ritual that would sacralise the memory of the imagined community's dead, while retaining the momentum of the rediscovered moral mission associated with that memory.

An almost identical row blew up in 1998 surrounding the new Dublin Famine monument – Rowan Gillespie's group of seven bronze emaciated figures staggering down Custom House Quay towards the docks and the emigrant ship. Controversy surrounds not the figures themselves, but the broader form and function of the memorial. The memorial was commissioned by the Irish Famine Commemoration Fund, chaired by Norma Smurfit, wife of one of Ireland's wealthiest businessmen and incidentally also chair of the trust responsible for the Millstreet Event. The Dublin memorial was to serve a similar instrumental purpose – the fund would be channelled to charities serving the 'homeless, unemployed and disadvantaged youth of Ireland', and donors contributing over £750 would have their (and their families) names engraved on bronze plaques set into the pavement below the figures. Corporate spon-

sors would have their names listed nearby. The sculptor described this 'sea of names', through which he intended to represent the continuity of Ireland and its diaspora, as an integral part of his work, although a sceptic might suspect such personal memorialisation of the donor owes less to aesthetic inspiration than to the handbook of professional fund-raisers. Despite the endorsement of the new President Mary McAleese and such Irish dignitaries as Gerry Adams and Jack Chariton, the reaction from AFRi and columnists such as Fintan O'Toole was a predictably savage attack on the affluent of today being encouraged to flaunt their wealth and power on an apparent memorial to the victims of inequality and injustice.<sup>48</sup> This fracas clearly illuminated the limitations of any national 'collective memory', and had the (beneficial) effect of foregrounding questions of class in both the politics of commemoration and the history of the Famine itself.

The range of local commemorations in Ireland is too large to be covered here. Generally speaking, the most successful have been those which have integrated the general history of the Famine into local histories, often focusing on local sites and attempting some reconnection between the local folklore traditions and historical research. Art critics might cavil at the conservatism of the representative forms adopted, but it is unquestionable that these have acquired meaning in their local contexts. A good example is the 1995 memorial facing the site of Ennismymon workhouse in County Clare, which juxtaposes the text of a particularly poignant incident from the Poor Law Union records with a figurative representation of the incident.<sup>49</sup> Other monuments have been erected in collaboration with local authorities, with local historical societies, and, in the case of Kilglass, County Roscommon, at the cemetery site associated with the pioneering Famine-period archaeological dig led by Professor Charles Orser.<sup>50</sup> A bronze plaque depicting an impoverished family by the sculptor Michael Killen was commissioned by the local Historical Society of Cappaghmore, County Limerick, which lost nearly half its population during the Famine. Its unveiling was accompanied by calls for greater attention to 'Third World' hunger.<sup>51</sup>

Local memorialisation in the Republic has largely avoided the controversies attached to some of the national events. One significant exception was an illegally erected monument commissioned by a private donor in Killala, County Mayo, which was rapidly removed after the County and Community councils expressed unhappiness over a text reading: 'The Irish Holocaust. Within here are the graves of victims of the Famine 1846–1849 caused by an uncaring, alien Government. We salute their memory.'<sup>52</sup> The suppression of this explicitly Mitchellite statement attracted the attention of the New York-based Irish Famine/Genocide Committee ('our mission: to promote the truth'), which protested and raised funds for the memorial.<sup>53</sup> The very unusualness of this sort of construction and confrontation in the Republic (in contrast to Irish America) draws attention to the divergences in commemorative emphasis (and function) between the 'domestic' and 'diasporic' contexts. This is not to say that traditionalist readings have disappeared in Ireland – as is clear from some of the more unreconstructed (and, to this historian, deeply frustrating) statements made in the 1997 Irish Senate debate on Famine commemoration – but that these have tended

to become increasingly marginalised or sublimated by newer (but not necessarily much more accurate) appropriations of Famine history.<sup>54</sup>

A contrast needs, of course, to be drawn between the Republic and Northern Ireland, where traditionalist nationalist ideology remains much more relevant to republicans. Yet, even here, the coincidence of the first IRA ceasefire in 1994 (and reconsiderations demanded by the 'peace process') and the Famine anniversary produced some shifts in emphasis. The year 1995 saw nationalist mural painters for the first time extend their repertoire to the previously neglected historical subject of the Famine. Several were produced under the auspices of *Féile an Phobail*, the West Belfast Community Festival (and, ironically, partly financed by the Northern Ireland Arts Council). The images are a combination of the original and the received – especially in the use of the December 1849 *Illustrated London News* engraving of Bridget O'Donnell and her children, unnamed here (as in most of the multiple recent uses of this image) and serving as an icon of a famished 'mother Ireland'.<sup>55</sup> The texts, a phrase of Mitchell's central argument that the Famine was caused by forced food exports, and an extract from Lady Wilde's well-known poem 'The Famine Year', are examples of the mobilisation of the past for contemporary political use. Not surprisingly, in 1997, the republican paper *An Phoblacht* ran a long series of articles on the Famine under the general title 'The Irish holocaust'.<sup>56</sup> Equally unsurprisingly, leading Unionists rejected the Famine commemorations as alien to their historical tradition.

This polarisation over memory in the north was not, however, as extreme as it at first appeared.<sup>57</sup> Local commemorations of Famine-related sites and library and museum displays were occurring on a non-sectarian basis.<sup>58</sup> Sinn Féin's 1996 motion for a commemorative window in the City Hall to recall the thousands of famine migrants who died in Belfast in 1846–48 may have been lauded in the republican press as a nationalist initiative, and received the expected furious denunciation from Paisleyite Unionist councillors,<sup>59</sup> but was accepted by a broad cross-community majority of members after its historical justification was upheld by the non-aligned and respected historian Jonathan Bardon.<sup>60</sup> A public competition was held in 1998 and the memorial window unveiled on 23 March 1999: it combines a collage of images drawn from the *Illustrated London News* with a view of the Belfast poorhouse, thereby locating iconic representations of the catastrophe within a recognisable local context.

Recent developments have suggested a further appropriation of the Famine as shared history in the North, although this is by no means universal. David Irvine, the leader of the loyalist PUP party, visited Tralee in 1999 to inspect work on one of the longest-running Famine memorial projects, the reconstructed immigrant ship *Jeanie Johnston*. Whatever the commemorative value of the ship (which one might suspect has more to do with heritage spectacle), the political symbolism of bringing equal numbers of trainee shipwrights from north and south together on the government-supported project is clearly present-centred.<sup>61</sup> Showing similar independence of mind, Irvine's colleague Billy Hutchinson attended the Irish Famine/Genocide Committee's 1997 conference in New York to speak on the effect of the Famine on Ulster Protestant communities.<sup>62</sup> This shifting attitude was given a public artistic

form in 2000 when the Ballymacarrett Arts and Cultural Society created a new mural in that solidly Protestant part of inner-city Belfast integrating the Famine into a chronological narrative running from St Patrick through the *Titanic* to modern Northern Ireland.<sup>63</sup>

One final case study deserves some mention. The history of the Irish Famine Museum at Strokestown Park House in Roscommon is well known – launched from a private initiative in the late 1980s (again with some input from Irish aid agencies) and promoted by Mary Robinson from 1991, its success was due overwhelmingly to the vision of its founder-curator Luke Dodd, who combined a deep sensitivity to locality with transatlantic museological skills. Opened by the President in 1994 in what was itself one of the first acts of public commemoration, the Museum may prove to be the most long-lasting of the many projects of the decade. Rejecting the 'celebration of victimhood', he identifies with the Washington, DC, Holocaust Museum, and dismissing the idea that Strokestown should serve as some kind of 'memorial to genocide' (a construction he disputes), Dodd has sought to convey the complexity of the factors that create famine and to relate these to the contested interpretations of Irish history.<sup>64</sup> Although criticised by one historian for giving insufficient voice to the victims alongside its interrogation of the voice and gaze of the powerful,<sup>65</sup> the museum has won plaudits from most commentators. In his otherwise savage attack on the ideological underpinnings of recent Irish heritage sites, David Brett has singled out Strokestown as a model of self-critical, emancipatory, and ethically challenging practice in a genre otherwise given over to spectacle or heavy-handed didacticism.<sup>66</sup> I find it hard to disagree. It is in the Famine Museum that commemoration, heritage, and the agenda of post-revisionist historical writing come together most satisfactorily.

By way of conclusion, I want to draw some tentative comparisons with the Irish-American experience of Famine commemoration. Although there have been some significant elements of overlap (not least those provided by Mary Robinson on her peregrinations), the balance has been decidedly different. Rather than seeking to construct a new identity out of Famine memory, Irish America has in general sought to revive a faltering ethnic tradition and inscribe its myth in the official record of American public life. In place of the cautious reassessments associated with the Irish events, the United States has seen public campaigns for the full reassertion of the Mitchelite myth of genocide, and a politically effective drive to have this taught in the nation's high schools alongside the Holocaust and the Middle Passage as comparative genocide or human rights studies.<sup>67</sup> After a process of critique from leading Irish-American historians (and others), two divergent models have now emerged – the New York curriculum, which has incorporated the reservations and insights derived from academic research, and the New Jersey model (adopted by at least five other states), which marginalises this in its undeviating pursuit of 'proof' of British genocide.<sup>68</sup>

To understand why the Famine has been so important to Irish America, and why, now, we need to juxtapose the gradual attenuation of its collective identity with a broader cultural climate that promotes ethnic accentuation and competition. The parallels with Jewish-American reappropriations of 'Holocaust consciousness' are more than striking, and it is difficult not to detect a similar enthusiasm for what

Novick describes as the 'sordid game' of seeking to 'wring an acknowledgment of superior victimisation from another contender'.<sup>69</sup> The negative consequences of this extreme instrumentalist agenda for historical research are obvious, but its political implications are equally disturbing. One leading African-American commentator has warned promoters of the Famine curriculum to be careful what they ask for: 'History is not an exercise in feel-good ethnic cheerleading. It is a cold-hearted examination of this nation's many people at their worst, as well as at their best. The study of the Irish, like any other groups, is going to reopen old wounds on all sides that, for many, have not quite healed.'<sup>70</sup>

This subject leads me back to my point of departure. In Ireland, historical writing on the Famine has both informed and served as a critical mirror to the process of commemoration. At the same time, historians have, I hope, been disabused of the idea that they have some sort of exclusive 'ownership' over the past, while those mobilising images of the Famine for contemporary purposes have been made aware that there are limitations to what can be justified from the evidence available. The Famine commemorations have seen, for the most part, a constructive interchange for those concerned, even if a number of points of friction have not been resolved.<sup>71</sup>

#### Notes

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- 5 R.F. Foster, 'Theme-parks and histories', in *The Irish Story: Telling Tales and Making It Up in Ireland* (London: Allen Lane, 2001), pp. 23–36.
- 6 For the formation of non-nationalist Irish 'memory', see Peter Gray, 'The making of mid-Victorian Ireland? Political economy and the memory of the Great Famine', in Peter Gray (ed.), *Victoria's Ireland? Irishness and Britishness, 1837–1901* (forthcoming, Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2004); for the modernisation narrative in British writing on Ireland, see Christopher Morash, *Writing the Irish Famine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 11–51.
- 7 Niall Ó Ciosáin, 'Was there "silence" about the Famine?', *Irish Studies Review*, 13 (1995), 7–10.
- 8 Sinead O'Connor's song 'Famine' on the 1994 *Universal Mother* album exemplifies the popular use of this idea. For her belief that 'That's the time we lost the memory of what we were before these things happened', see interview in *Irish Times* (28 January 1995).
- 9 For a recent discussion of the language of trauma in Famine commemoration, see Margaret Kelleher, 'Hunger and history: monuments to the Great Irish Famine', in *Textual Practice*, 16:2 (2002), 249–76.
- 10 See Cathal Póiréir, 'Folk memory and the Famine', in Cathal Póiréir (ed.), *The Great Irish Famine* (Cork: Mercier Press, 1995), pp. 219–31; Cormac Ó Gráda, *Black '47 and Beyond*:

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  - 12 Pierre Nora, 'Between memory and history: *Les lieux de mémoire*', *Representations*, 26 (1989), 7–25.
  - 13 See Morton D. Winsberg, 'The suburbanization of the Irish in Boston, Chicago and New York', *Éire-Ireland*, 21 (1986), 90–104. For anxiety about the loss of the communal memories underpinning ethnic identity, see 'Ethnic clichés evoke anger in Irish eyes', *New York Times* (12 March 1995); 'An ocean away, the mark of tragedy remains', *Boston Globe* (24 August 1997).
  - 14 Nora, 'Between memory and history', p. 19.
  - 15 Patrick O'Farrell, 'Whose reality? The Irish Famine in history and literature', *Historical Studies*, 20 (1982–83), 1–13; James S. Donnelly, 'The construction of the memory of the Famine in Ireland and the Irish Diaspora, 1850–1900', *Éire-Ireland*, 31 (1996), 26–61.
  - 16 John Mitchell, *The Last Conquest of Ireland (Perhaps)* (London: Burns, Oates and Washbourne, n.d.), p. 219.
  - 17 On Mitchell, see Morash, *Writing the Irish Famine*, pp. 52–75; for the role of Famine-era nationalist poetry in shaping its textual memory, see Christopher Morash, 'Introduction', in C. Morash (ed.), *The Hungry Voice: The Poetry of the Irish Famine* (Blackrock: Irish Academic Press, 1989), pp. 15–37.
  - 18 The heroic model of memorialisation can be seen in the cult of the Manchester Martyrs; see Gary Owens, 'Constructing the martyrs: the Manchester executions and the nationalist imagination', in Lawrence W. McBride (ed.), *Images, Icons and the Irish Nationalist Imagination* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1999), pp. 18–36.
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  - 22 Judith Hill, *Irish Public Sculpture: A History* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1998), p. 157.
  - 23 This uncertainty is reflected in the agonistic essays collected in Máirín Ní Dhonnchadh and Theo Dorgan (eds), *Revising the Rising* (Derry: Field Day, 1991); see also Keith Jeffery, 'The Great War in modern Irish memory', in T.G. Fraser and Keith Jeffery (eds), *Men, Women and War* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 1993).
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- 29 A subsequent reissue acknowledged the role of the editor in 'fictionalising' the original edition, but continued to claim it was based on an authentic document and that 'cumulative sum stylometry' analysis had proven Sellar was not the author; James J. Mangan (ed.), *Gerald Keegan's Famine Diary: Journey to a New World* (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1999), pp. 6, 12.
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- 31 Liam Kennedy, 'Modern Ireland: post-colonial society or post-colonial pretensions?', *Irish Review*, 13 (1992/93), 107–21; Therese Caherry (ed.), *Is Ireland a Third World Country?* (Belfast: Beyond the Pale, 1992).
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- 71 This paper was first read to the 'Memory of Catastrophe' conference at the University of Southampton in April 2000. My thanks to my co-organiser Kendrick Oliver and the other participants for their critical comments, and to Margaret Kelleher, Niall Ó Ciosáin and Cormac Ó Gráda for sharing their thoughts on Famine commemoration.

## 5 Glen D. Kuecker

### 'The greatest and the worst': dominant and subaltern memories of the Dos Bocas well fire of 1908

A cement marker stands three feet tall and a foot wide on the banks of a body of water near the town of San Diego del Mar, a small, rural community in the Mexican state of Veracruz. It is painted white with some blue and red, but the paint is weathered by the rains and sun of the semi-tropical region. The paint is faded, but one can tell words were once written on the marker. As if to tease us, those words are not discernible. A local informs me that the marker commemorates an event known as the Dos Bocas well fire of 1908.

An artefact signifying historical memory, the marker is full of contrary yet ambivalent meanings. It signifies an event important enough for commemoration, yet it does not merit maintenance. It stands as a visual clue, strong enough to keep the memory of the event alive. Yet, the faded words represent loss of specific and detailed memory. More pedestrian than many markers of memory, such as the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and the Jewish Museum in Berlin, this small cement structure nevertheless still invites us to restore its words, to unpack the memory of the well fire, and explore its deeper meanings, both past and present.

This essay examines how the Dos Bocas well fire was a catastrophe, an experience that signified to locals a disruption in the course of their lives. The essay explores how locals and nationals gave meaning to that disruption, and how their understandings of the fire produced distinct proto-memories of the event. The essay illustrates how one proto-memory became dominant, and how it subsumed the alternative narrative. The dominant proto-memory was constructed by national actors, journalists, federal government officials, and scientists. The subsumed narrative was produced by locals. Their discourse perceived the fire to be against their interests, a representation that became a significant subaltern memory.

Moving from analysis of the event and the formation of competing memories, the essay explores how memory became part of the hegemonic discourse about the place of oil in Mexican modernity. This analysis shows how 'official' memory was contested by a subaltern survival of local identity and memory. This analysis focuses upon the nationalisation of oil in 1938 and how the 'heroic myth' of nationalisation further subsumed the subversive local discourse about the pernicious features of the fire.