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History by proxy: imaging the great Irish famine

Kelly, N.A.

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CONCLUSION

Fig. 85 is a map of Ireland, marked with a seemingly chance set of location markers. These indicate the places of Famine remembrance I have visited and the sites illustrators, artists and photographers have depicted or drawn inspiration from to produce images of Famine experience. These locations are all mentioned in the previous seven chapters and each has been represented as a site of Famine memory of one kind or another. The origins of some are far from clear and barely acknowledged in their connection to the Famine; others are layered with previous and subsequent historical events competing for the visitor's attention; others still are continuously coated with shifting interpretative practices. In producing a map of these sites I want to draw a connection between the ways in which the limits of place - any place - as the site of history are indicative of the problems of visibility in cultural memory. The limiting factors of naming place and the problems of a reliance on visible evidence collide in repeated prioritizations of material culture in deciding, at collective, cultural levels, what histories are better re-membered than others.

Across all the theoretical interests raised by my objects of analysis in this study - the disciplines of post and neo-colonial theory, museum studies and art history and the concepts of authenticity, narrative, hunger and active remembrance - runs a critique of the suitability of dominant codes of positivism in generating the means to remember negative events. I have approached the Famine as an event defined by absence and loss, and fundamentally, as a history of poverty. In this understanding, the event and its (post) memory exemplify the challenges facing positivist strategies in historical accounts mediated through the exhibition of art and artefacts, the production of illustrations, public memorials, heritage and tourist sites and less readily visible or tangible sites of remembrance.

In identifying and linking recurrent themes of representation through chapter topics, I have considered cultural memory as both individually and socially functional. Throughout my chapters themes of ruralism and rebellion in museum exhibits; time and questioning of historiography through exhibition practice; the emaciated body as metaphor; dispossession and emigration; personal witness and heritage sites; collective narratives and touristic trails; and burial, landscape and mourning emerge as shaping factors in how the present-day cultural memory of the Famine is negotiated. These factors were and are made manifest, literally and evocatively, at different sites, which I have marked on Fig. 85. Though each one is differently characterized, all the locations that I address foster a register of awareness of how the interpretation of place can alter perceptions of the past and the present. These occurred as the collapse of nationalist struggles into localisms in microcosmic representations; the link between touring exhibitions, contextual relevance and

relative audience politics; the geo-political positioning of imaging hunger; the site-specific nature of dispossession, followed by the transitory uncertainties of displacement; the location of voice in distilling the focus of heritage; the ways dedicated sites of commemoration are activated by visitation; and finally the locus of active remembrance in absence formulated by an overt practice of proxy. This practice comprises thoughtful action ranging from reading art, an object or a place to walking deliberately down a street or through a field.

In mapping the sites I have discussed in this conventional diagrammatic form, I have generated a series of dots and text that merely indicates a set of geographical locations. While this illustrates mapping as a necessarily failed visualization of any memory, it is a useful way to indicate the ways in which place, and the experience of it, is usually formed as a site of cultural memory. Hooper-Greenhill draws attention to the fact that cartographies are never neutral and mapping is a legitimating practice (17). She presents a correlation between the traditional functions of a map and the modernist museum, arguing that what maps do conceptually, museums do with things (18): “it [the modernist museum] unifies and rationalizes, pictures and presents relationships” (17). On this positivist level, the static nature of this kind of printed image, with recognizable geographical codes, identifiable placenames and widely readable relativities of actual scale, give credence to the viability of what I have chosen to analyze and endorse the kinds of selectivity at play in my choices. Reading the map more critically, however, the concerns raised by my questions in Chapter Two, concerning how to remember and how to look back, emerge in a newer question; *where is memory?*

Analysis of the visual and material forms of Famine cultural memory highlights the need for serial memory, mobile modes of remembrance and a recognition of the artificial nature of material culture, whether artefact, art or intentional artifice. From the work of Alanna O’Kelly, for example, to various curatorial endeavours, the need for multiple and varied perspectives is iterated. Aside from these observations, the issue of public place remains potent in Famine memory. Notions of relative cultural periphery and vitality were part of the terrible play-off between an increasingly generalized all-encompassing countryside that distinguished and differentiated municipal centres during the Famine era and in its aftermath. In the slew of modernist concerns, these outlooks affected the nature of early imaging of the Famine.

These ideas were later challenged by post-colonial concerns and re-figured in social art histories. In urban spaces, outside of the museums and galleries, on city streets, in parks and on quay sides, both in Ireland and elsewhere, recent Famine memorials demand still reflection and in this instigate a conceptual renegotiation of

the social price paid for the unnatural evolution of what are now towns and cities in Ireland and accrued diasporas in other places. In rural schemes of Ireland, acknowledged and hidden commemorative sites encourage active mental engagement with the flow between time and space, and so also provoke a reconsideration of the weighted modernist accounts of cultural margin and civic hub. How time and experience configure place is, arguably, acknowledged in the recent declaration by the Irish Government of an official National Famine Commemoration Day as an annual event, rotating between the four provinces of Ireland. The event, in its inherent mobility, choice of first location and array of actual and potential elements, indicates the potential further redress of, or at least draws attention to, the divisive imbalance between urban and rural concerns in the commemoration of the Famine.

On the map, I have marked Abbeystrewery Cemetery outside Skibbereen Town in County Cork. This is the site of a mass grave of thousands of unnamed dead, as discussed in Chapter Seven. The location was also the key venue for the first official National Famine Commemoration Day, held on 17 May 2009, which culminated in a walk led by the minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, Éamon Ó Cuív, from O'Donovan Rossa Park to Abbeystrewery Cemetery. This final day of ceremonies in Cork came after a week of commemorative activities and was constituted by a trail, beginning in the park and concluding at the cemetery. A tree was planted by the Minister, and a new plaque unveiled to mark the Famine commemoration. There were a series of readings and prayers led by religious leaders, and music by a brass band. At the cemetery, following a guard of honour, there was a laying of wreaths by Minister Ó Cuív, the Mayors of Cork city and Skibbereen town, as well as the Ambassadors of Canada, Kenya, Bulgaria and Nigeria. There was observance of a minute silence as part of the ceremonies also.

The National Famine Commemoration 2009 as an event is difficult to fully contain in conventional documentary forms and impossible to adequately map. A leaflet leaves a trace of the eight days of events: a catalogue of the places, times and facilitators of storytelling, staged plays, group walks and music recitals, and a listing of the components of the final formal commemorative event at the park and at the mass graveside. The events were filmed and clips collated into a 120-minute official film, *Famine Commemoration Week*, which serves as another partial document from the moment the proceedings ended. The commercial DVD, *The Great Famine: Remember Skibbereen*, takes its name from a new 55-minute documentary on the Famine in Skibbereen also on the DVD.³³⁸ The style of the documentary is evolved from a focus

³³⁸ The DVD was supported by the West Cork Development Partnership, as well as by State and European sponsorship.

on personal narratives more than the provision of statistical overviews of the scale of the Famine, though the implications of microhistory are evident throughout.

As a link between an area in Ireland and a national negative history, the events of the National Famine Commemoration 2009 and their filming constitute the creation of a cultural memory. This memory is formulated in a focus on the past through the arts and group activities that re-invent tragedy as a source for creativity and shared experiences in the present day, while promoting the negotiation of the postmemory of a collective trauma through cultural production. Such binary interpretative practice is self-consciously driven by ideas of collective or shared remembrance, activated not only at specific sites, but also at stated times. Skibbereen as the site of the first National Famine Commemoration Day is unsurprising, and indeed the Minister Ó Cuív drew attention to the fact that Skibbereen and Schull “were one of the worst affected areas during the Famine” (Skibbereen Heritage Center, 2009). The implied relativism is not neutral, but with the extensive care given to Famine memory at Skibbereen, its selection as the first site of an annual memorial seems a fitting and reasonable tribute to years of local commitment.

The future of the National Famine Commemoration Day as a mobile focus is promising, but will hopefully not be automatically aligned only to readymade sites of visibility, nor should it replace the recognition of official support for multiple strategies of remembrance. Identifying the problems associated with physically static or fixed material memorials and unchanging stories does not negate their usefulness: rather it is the acknowledgement of how sites, objects and narratives function in cultural memory that will provide the most challenging and useful triggers for active remembrance. Not drawn exclusively from the past, such places and imagings will instead draw us towards the past in order to fully understand our present and shape our futures. While teams of heritage and history experts at and for UNESCO are busily drawing up strategies to inform growing policy emphasis on the preservation, conservation and promotion of intangible heritage, it is worth bearing in mind that if imaging the past is a process of proxy, the quality of all memory is prized open to renegotiation. Defined by constant reconsideration, any example of heritage is, like negative history and irrespective of variant material legacy, by thorough collective engagement ultimately intangible.³³⁹

³³⁹ UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) describes intangible heritage as living heritage, or the functions and values of cultural expressions and practices, which provide:

[...] each bearer of such expressions a sense of identity and continuity, insofar as he or she takes ownership of them and constantly recreates them. As a driving force of cultural diversity, living heritage is very fragile. In recent years, it has received international recognition and its safeguarding has

Arbitrary mapping, partial evidence, missing stories, loss of possessions, lack of food: a trail that returns us, its travelers, to a past reality we cannot seem to grasp because the very conditions of these events were, as all poverty is, shockingly and insistently based on the naturalization of systems of disappearance and dematerialization. This recognition is not a license to negate the need for the appearance of suffering, nor is it a cue to strategize a stifling rhetoric of ineffability: on the contrary, the struggle to remember that is highlighted in Famine cultural memory advises that absent voices are never unimaginable.

become one of the priorities of international cooperation thanks to UNESCO's leading role in the adoption of the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. (UNESCO 2009)

History by Proxy

1. Strokestown, County Roscommon [Strokestown Famine Museum](#)
2. Ballingarry, County Tipperary [1848 Warehouse](#)
3. Turlough Park House, County Mayo [National Museum of Ireland: Museum of Country Life](#)
4. Johnstown Castle Estate, County Wexford [Johnstown Agricultural Museum and Famine Exhibitions](#)
5. Cashel, County Tipperary [Cashel Folk Village](#)
6. Dublin City [University College Dublin, Bellfield: Irish Folklore Commission Collection](#)
[Corcaigh Park, Clondalkin Famine Memorial Arboretum](#)
[Irish Museum of Modern Art, Kilmainham: *Representations of the Famine* 1998 exhibition](#)
[Royal Dublin Society, Ballsbridge: *Famine 150* 1995 exhibition](#)
[St. Stephen's Green: *Wolfe Tone Monument and Famine Fountain*](#)
[Dublin Docklands: *Famine* sculpture](#)
[Dublin Port: *Jeanie Johnston ship*](#)
[Various Venues: *Exhibition of Pictures of Irish Historical Interest* 1946 exhibition](#)
[Touring Exhibitions: *Famine 150; Representations of the Famine*](#)
[George Moore Society: *Famine* 1995 exhibition](#)
[University College Cork: *Famines Yesterday and Today: The Irish Experience in a Global Context* exhibition](#)
[Source for *Illustrated London News*](#)
[Source for *Illustrated London News*](#)
[Source of Cottage, Irish Hunger Memorial, New York](#)
[The National Famine Memorial](#)
[Kavanagh Famine Cottage](#)
[Famine Village](#)
[Famine Village](#)
[Dunbrody ship](#)
[Galway Crystal Ltd.](#)
[The Workhouse Heritage Centre](#)
[Workhouse Museum](#)
[Skibbereen Heritage Centre](#)
[Skibbereen Trail](#)
[Abbeystrewery Cemetery](#)
[Annual Memorial Walk](#)
7. Derry City [Famine Village, Visitor's Centre](#)
[Molly Gollivan's Cottage and Traditional Farm](#)
8. Claremorris, County Mayo [Famine Wall](#)
9. Cork City [Famine Road](#)
[Ulster Folk and Transport Museum](#)
[Soldier's Cemetery](#)
[Famine Graveyard](#)
[Famine Wall](#)
[Memorial, *An Ghorta Mór*](#)
[Garden of Remembrance](#)
[Burial Site](#)
[Burial Site](#)
[Famine Cross Monument](#)
[Burial Site](#)
[Burial Site, Source for *Sanctuary/Wasteland*](#)
10. Kilrush, County Clare [Burial Site](#)
11. Clonakilty, County Cork [Crucifix, Presentation Sisters](#)
12. Attymas, County Mayo [The Arrival, Ireland Park](#)
13. Murrisk, County Mayo [Irish Hunger Memorial, Battery Park](#)
14. Fahan, Sleah Head, County Kerry [Irish Famine Memorial Park](#)
15. Cill Rialaig, Bolus Head, County Kerry [Famine Cross](#)
16. Slievemore, Achill, County Mayo [Immigrant Cemetery; Memorials](#)
17. New Ross Harbour, County Wexford [Australian Monument to the Great Irish Famine \(1845-48\)](#)
18. Galway City [Hyde Park Barracks](#)
19. Dunfanaghy, County Donegal [Memorial at St. Luke's Church](#)
20. Donaghmore, County Laois [Famine Memorial, Clarence Dock](#)
21. Skibbereen, County Cork
22. Doolough, County Mayo
23. Doagh Inishowen Peninsula, County Donegal
24. Bonane, Kenmare, County Kerry
25. Knockmealdown Wall, County Tipperary / County Waterford
26. Béal na Bláth, County Cork
27. Cultra, Hollywood, County Antrim
28. Fermoy, County Cork
29. Ennistymon, County Clare
30. Carrick-on-Shannon, County Leitrim
31. Callan, County Kilkenny
32. Carragistira, County Cork
33. Newmarket County Cork
34. Gort naCille, County Galway
35. Thallabhawn, County Mayo
36. Lisaniiskey, Knockcroghery, County Roscommon
37. Maynooth, County Kildare:
38. Toronto, Canada
39. New York City
40. Boston City
41. Kingston, Ontario
42. Grosse Île, Quebec Canada
43. Sydney, Australia
44. Liverpool, England

Figure 85: Key: Map of Ireland, History by Proxy

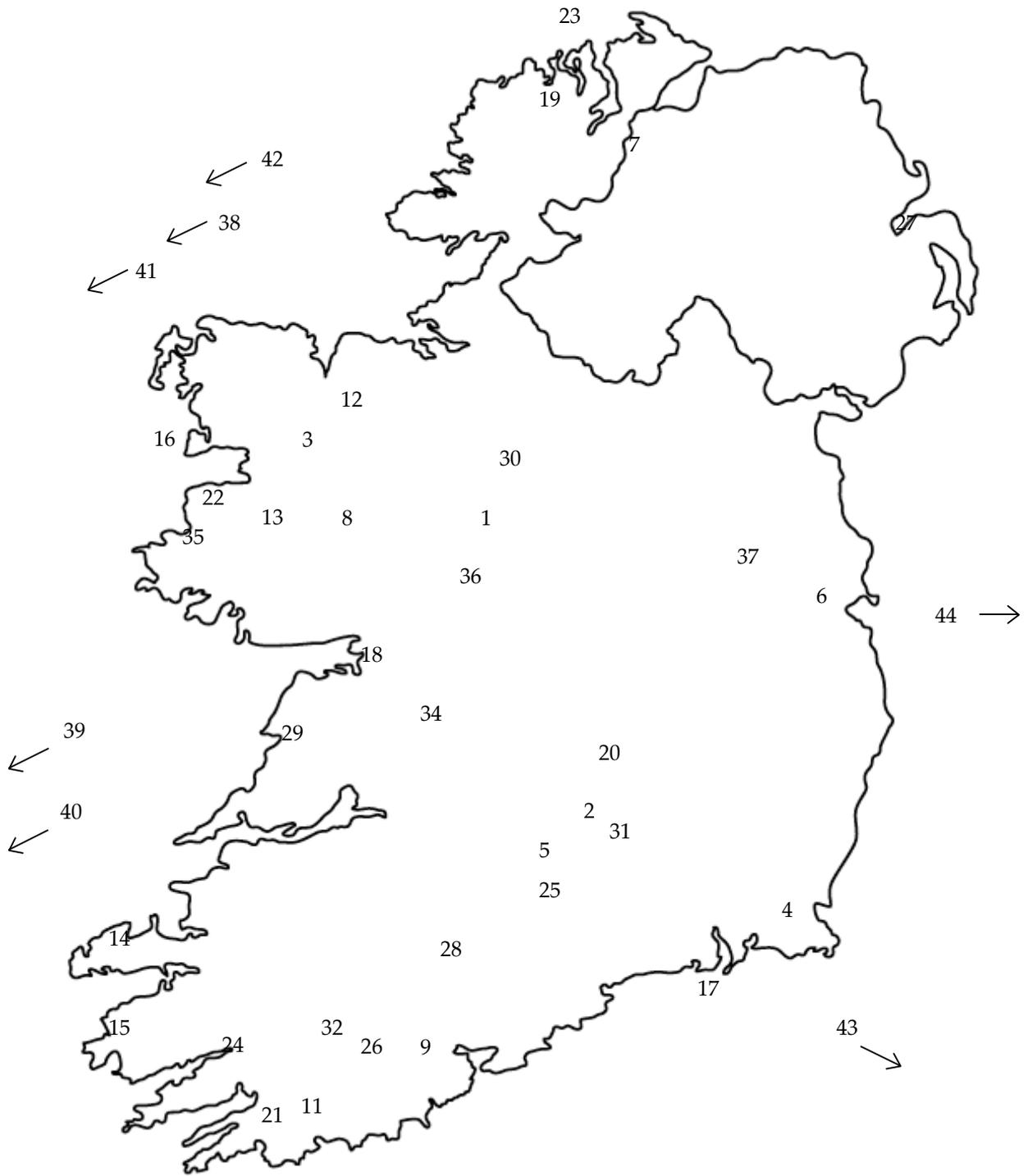


Figure 85: Map of Ireland, History by Proxy