

An Outline of Irish Famine Historiography

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ABSTRACT

The histories of the Great Irish Famine have been written from different perspectives and by historians belonging to different schools of thought. As a result, there have been competing interpretations of the Famine and we can distinguish three major standpoints among historians writing histories of the potato blight of the 1840s: nationalist, revisionist and post-revisionist. The first publications on the Famine started to appear in the nineteenth century and were written by Irish nationalist historians and politicians, who invariably condemned the British government. Later on, mainly due to the exacerbation of the conflict within the Irish society revisionist historians, who played down the guilt of the British for the Famine, arrived and gained currency. Since the 150th anniversary of the Great Famine in 1995 the Famine scholarship was joined by anti-revisionist historians called post-revisionist, whose hallmark is an emotional approach to describing the events of the Famine as well as not shunning to pin the blame on the British administration. This article outlines the historiography of the Great Irish Famine, the thorny problems linked with it and the sources of the contentions among scholars.

KEYWORDS: Irish Famine, historiography, nationalistic, revisionist, post-revisionist.

ABSTRAKT

W rezultacie tego, że historia Wielkiego Irlandzkiego Głodu była pisana z różnych perspektyw i przez historyków reprezentujących różne nurty naukowe pojawiły się trzy rywalizujące ze sobą interpretacje Wielkiego Głodu: nacjonalistyczna, rewizjonistyczna

i po-rewizjonistyczna. Pierwsze publikacje na temat zarazy ziemniaczanej i jej skutków zaczęły pojawiać się w XIX wieku i były pisane przez nacjonalistycznych historyków i polityków irlandzkich, którzy z reguły ostro krytykowali ówczesną politykę brytyjskiego rządu w stosunku do Irlandii. W latach dwudziestych XX wieku wraz eskalacją konfliktu w Irlandii zaczęli pojawiać się i nabierać na popularności historycy rewizjonistyczni, którzy umniejszali winę Brytyjczyków za głód. Od czasu 150 rocznicy wielkiego głodu w 1995 roku zaczęli z kolei pojawiać się historycy anty-rewizjonistyczni zwani po-rewizjonistami, których charakterystycznymi cechami było emocjonalne podejście do pisania historii wydarzeń, które miały podczas Wielkiego Głodu jak i nie uciekanie od obwiniania brytyjskiej administracji. Niniejszy artykuł przedstawia historiografię Wielkiego Głodu Irlandzkiego, związane z nią problemy i wynikające z niej źródła sporów wśród historyków.

SŁOWA KLUCZE: irlandzki głód, historiografia, nacjonalistyczna, rewizjonistyczna, po-rewizjonistyczna.

William Makepeace Thackeray points out in his travelogue depicting Ireland on the eve of the Great Irish Famine that it is not easy to form an opinion about this country, as in Ireland “there are two truths, the Catholic truth and the Protestant truth” (351). Thackeray’s words succinctly reflect Irish historiography, as the division within Irish society has had a significant impact on the writing of Irish history. As a result, the history of the green island is fraught with different points of view as well as various and conflicting interpretations. The event which is an epitome of the divisive nature of Irish historiography is the Irish Famine. This article outlines a thorny problem of different approaches to writing the history of the Famine and the various standpoints that one can encounter.

The Great Irish Famine has been interpreted by various historians belonging to various schools of thought and, in addition, coming from different countries. Diverse facets of this event have been given different values and publications can differ in regard to the dates marking the beginning of the Famine as well as its end. Further, depending on the viewpoint one can find death tolls which provide different numbers. Taking into account the conflicting interpretations, the Famine history has been generally written from three vying perspectives: nationalistic, revisionist and post-revisionist. Melissa Fegan states that the Famine historiographers agree as far as the facts are concerned and the source

of the contention stems from “the construction that should be placed on these facts and, perhaps above all, the tenor of their expression” (14).

The earliest accounts of the Famine were written by Irish historians and politicians, who invariably depicted this calamity from the nationalistic point of view and pinned the blame for it on the British government and the English. The first publication relating and commenting on the events which took place after the potato blight had set on the stalks of the potato appeared in 1860 and was entitled *The Last Conquest of Ireland (Perhaps)*. It was penned by John Mitchel and was the first attempt to interpret the Irish Famine. Mitchel was a hawkish Irish nationalist, who during the time of the disaster was charged with treason and sedition and sentenced to fourteen years in exile in Australia. It is no small wonder then that his interpretation of the Famine puts the British government in a very unfavorable light having been banished by it from his home country. Therefore, Mitchel writes in his book about an “artificial” famine, as he claims that at the time there was enough food in Ireland to support her inhabitants but the food was denied to starving Irishmen and was exported to England. The exportation of foodstuffs out of Ireland during the dearth caused by the potato blight is one of the nationalistic myths widely propagated by Irish nationalists. Mitchel’s well-known and encapsulating perspective is epitomized in his words that “[t]he Almighty indeed, sent the potato blight, but the English created the famine” (Mitchel 324). This sentence shows England and particularly her government as the main culprit responsible for the death and emigration of millions of the Irish. Another important aspect pointed out by Mitchel in his expose is that at the time and, in fact, since legislative union in 1801, Ireland belonged to the United Kingdom and the relief for the inhabitants of the green island should have been financed by the whole kingdom. Nonetheless, according to the popular saying “Irish property has to pay for Irish poverty” Ireland and the Irish had to bear the burden themselves, which Mitchel views as a mockery of the Union between Ireland and the Great Britain. Despite the fact that Mitchel wrote *The Last Conquest* in order to propagate nationalistic, anti-British views and many of his arguments are implausible, according to James S. Donnelly, Jr. “other charges contained a core of truth, or an important aspect of the truth, even if they were not wholly accurate” (np). Thus, Mitchel’s book should not be completely rejected but should lead to additional questions and reflections.

Another author who wrote a history of the Famine from the nationalistic point of view was a Catholic priest, John O’Rourke. In his *History of the Great Irish Famine*, published in 1875, he depicts the disaster as the result of the conflict between Catholics and Protestants. The blame for the death of a great number of Irish Catholics is placed, accordingly,

on Protestants. On top of that, Mary Daly points out that even though O'Rourke's history was the first academic interpretation of the Great Famine in which he used questionnaires sent to the witnesses who survived the years of the potato blight, "the thrust of his work is largely derived from the coverage in the Nationalist press" (71-2). Consequently, this gives a biased and narrow interpretation of the Famine, which is further exacerbated by the subjective standpoint of the author. Despite this O'Rourke's book as in case of Mitchel's can still be a useful source of information, particularly as it contains accounts of earlier famines which visited Ireland.

Historians known in Irish historiography as revisionists followed the nationalists. They shunned the nationalistic viewpoint and debunked many of the myths linked with it. The Revisionist school of Irish history is inextricably linked with the foundation of the scholarly journal, *Irish Historical Studies*, by two graduates of the Institute of Historical Research of the University of London, Theodore William Moody and Robert Dudley Edwards (Brady 3). As stated by Moody, their aim was to face facts and to write correct history and not to propagate myths, which would mean avoiding facts. As the most significant and dangerous myths hampering writing Irish history, Moody deemed the separatist-sectarian myth connected with Ulster loyalism and the nationalist myth characteristic of southern republicanism (Brady 7). From the beginning, revisionist studies focused on researching solely the south of Ireland. The oral tradition was rejected as valuable historical evidence because it was considered as rife with subjectivity. Furthermore, revisionist historians have employed in their research only documents in English, disregarding sources written in Irish, which for centuries had been the dominant language of Ireland (Whelan 185). The new historians also wanted to separate themselves from their nineteenth century predecessors and influences of the natural sciences on writing history by "[t]he purification of method in the collection, criticism and citation of sources" as well as by the purification of the language used to write historical discourse (Brady 24). Revisionism particularly gained currency in the 1960's with the escalation of the IRA campaign, which employed nationalistic myths denouncing the British and, as a result, revisionists embarked on the mission to lay to rest myths surrounding Irish history (Kinealy).

The book which became a hallmark and an embodiment of the revisionist perspective published in 1988 was *Modern Ireland 1600-1972* written by R.F. Foster. It drew a clear demarcation line between what is called revisionism and anti-revisionism in Irish historiography and since then it has had many supporters as well as critics. The chapter on the Irish Famine included in the book is a telling example of revisionist interpretation

of the nineteenth century disaster. Foster portrays the Famine as a minor event in Irish history and puts down its seeming significance to “an effect of the insidious nationalist bias in Irish historiography” (Whelan 201). Marginalization of the Irish Famine is typical for the revisionist point of view, which considers the Famine as the inexorable result of the state in which Ireland had been placed. Another popular argument among revisionist historians is that the British government did not have adequate resources to stop exportation of foodstuffs out of Ireland at the time when Irishmen were perishing by their thousands – a fact that was also often underlined in nationalistic histories in order to put the blame on the British ministry.

The Great Famine: Studies in Irish History 1842-1852 edited by R. Dudley Edwards and T. Desmond Williams is another publication that belongs to the revisionist school of Irish history. The abovementioned T.W. Moody had been chosen as one of the editors of the book during its preparation but eventually resigned. The publication of the book was ordered in the 1940s by the current Irish Prime Minister Eamon de Valera to celebrate the upcoming centenary of the Great Irish Famine in 1945. In the end, the book was published in 1956 after 12 years of preparations¹. Cormac Ó Gráda states that *The Great Famine* did not fulfill its expectations for a complete history of the Famine and was written from the perspective of a politician, an administrator or a medical practitioner (“Making History” 278). The blame for the Famine was attributed to social and economical factors such as overpopulation and perennial poverty which had beset Ireland on the eve of the potato blight of the 1840s. The human factor was completely ruled out as one that could have caused the tragedy in Ireland (Whelan 199). Of course, this differed considerably from the nationalistic interpretations where individual persons such as current Prime Ministers or other British administrators were blamed for the suffering of Ireland and her inhabitants. Christine Kinealy perfectly encapsulates the sanitized interpretation of the revisionist histories of the Famine stating that “suffering, emotion and the sense of catastrophe, have been removed from revisionist interpretations of the Famine with clinical precision [and] [t]he obscenity and degradation of starvation and Famine have been marginalised” (np). As a result of the exclusion of any traces of emotion from its interpretations, revisionism became viewed pejoratively in Irish historiography.

¹ For a detailed history of the publication of *The Great Famine: Studies in Irish History 1842-1852* see Cormac Ó Gráda, “Making History in Ireland in the 1940s and 1950s: The Saga of The Great Famine,” *Interpreting Irish History: The Debate on Historical Revisionism 1938-1994*, Ciaran Brady (ed.) (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1994), pp. 269-288.

The revisionist *The Great Famine* is often compared with *The Great Hunger*, the book written by an Englishwoman Cecil Woodham-Smith, which was published in 1962. Woodham-Smith's book achieved notable commercial success but, at the same time, was roundly criticized by revisionist historians such as R.F. Foster. The main arguments used against the book was that Woodham-Smith was not a professional historian, that the book was fraught with emotions and that the narrative focused on the chastisement of individuals who played pivotal roles in bringing relief to the Irish. In spite of all the criticism *The Great Hunger* appealed to Eamon de Valera, who was rather disappointed with the commissioned by him, *The Great Famine*. What is more, Woodham-Smith received an honorary doctorate from the National University of Ireland, the instigator of which was probably de Valera, the Chancellor of the university (Ó Gráda "Making History" 280). After *The Great Hunger* had been published there appeared also many glowing reviews of the book, in which the Irish Famine was compared to the Holocaust and the British ruling classes were described as willful murderers. Such reviews were, of course, disapproved of by the revisionists. Melissa Fegan summarizes the differences between the two books saying that "*The Great Hunger* has been accused of cashing in on the melodrama, *The Great Famine* of detraumatization" (22).

From the 1960s onwards historians researching conditions in Ireland before and after the Irish Famine started to employ methodology derived from economics and statistical analyses. The economics approach gained currency among researchers investigating the state of the nineteenth century Ireland and led to new readings of the Famine. As a result, the abject poverty bedeviling Ireland was no longer viewed as the impoverishment of the Irish society but rather as the unfair allocation of resources and incomes. The use of economics also helped to destroy a few myths attached to the Irish Famine, however, it did not lead to the complete explanation of the Famine (Daly 73-83). Two of the most important publications that were published at that time are Kenneth H. Connell's *The Population of Ireland* and Raymond D. Crotty's *Irish Agricultural Production: Its Volume and Structure*. Based on his research Crotty similarly to the revisionist historians marginalizes the importance of the Famine in Irish history stating that "[t]he Great Famine was not a true watershed in Irish social and economic history; rather the change in demand conditions on the British market which was heralded by the Battle of Waterloo represented such a watershed" (64).

The third perspective called post-revisionism is connected with the 150th anniversary of the assault of the potato blight in 1995 and which galvanized many historians to write about the Famine and thus brought an inflow of new books dealing with this theme.

Peace processes and the hiatus in the IRA campaign also played a significant role in the rejuvenation of the debate on Irish historiography and allowed historians to write and discuss Irish history without fear of aggravating the situation in the conflict-ridden Ireland. At the time, there appeared also a great number of scholars out of Ireland doing research on the Famine and who brought a fresh outsider view on the potato blight. Fegan underlines that the characteristic of post-revisionist historians who appeared then was that they were encouraged to make their interpretations more emotional (21). The scholar who played a particularly important role at that time was Cormac Ó Gráda. Combining economics with history as well as employing sources in the Irish language, he managed to counter revisionist doctrines and avoided being called nationalist (Whelan 202). In his book *Ireland before and after the Famine: Explorations in Economic History, 1800-1925*, published in 1988, Ó Gráda already mentions the lack of emotions in works dealing with the Famine saying “[s]tudents of other famines seeking comparative insights may be impressed by the lack of Irish emotion or outrage, but they will quickly note too that themes central to mainstream famine history research have been ignored in Irish work” (1988: 79). Thus, as mentioned above by Fegan the resurgence of emotions in the interpretation became a recognizable hallmark of post-revisionism. Ó Gráda’s most significant books are *Black ’47 and Beyond: The Great Irish Famine in History, Economy, and Memory* and *Ireland: A New Economic History 1780-1939*.

Prior to Ó Gráda’s work an important scholar who had contributed to the research on the Irish Famine was American-Israeli historian Joel Mokyr, who wrote *Why Ireland Starved: An Analytical and Quantitative History of the Irish Economy, 1800-1850*. Mokyr also employed economics and rejected revisionism and his main conclusion was that “[w]hen the chips were down in the frightful summer of 1847, the British simply abandoned the Irish and let them perish [and] [t]here is no doubt that Britain could have saved Ireland” (291). Hence, opposing revisionist interpretations Mokyr put it plainly that the imperial government of the United Kingdom failed its subjects inhabiting the sister island.

To the post-revisionist school of historians writing on the Great Irish Famine also belongs Peter Gray, a prolific historian, whose important contribution to the Famine histories is his book based on his doctoral dissertation *Famine, Land, Politics: British Government and Irish Society: 1843-50*. In the book Gray diligently analyzes the British political scene, ideologies prevalent at that time among British politicians and their influence on the decisions made during the failure of the potato crop in Ireland. According to Gray the dominant ideologies foiled politicians in adopting adequate relief measures

to help Ireland. Further, Gray points out that the Famine was viewed as an opportunity to remodel and cure the Irish society and British politicians “were prepared to play a deadly game of brinkmanship in their campaign to impose a capitalist cultural revolution on the Irish” (Gray 331).

As has been shown, Irish Famine historiography is rife with contentious issues stemming from conflicting interpretations of nationalists, revisionists and post-revisionist historians. These different perspectives on Irish history can be put down, *inter alia*, to the schism within the Irish nation which generated dangerous milieu in Ireland. This had, in turn, impact on the historians, most of whom took into consideration the state of Ireland. Kathleen Nut also attributes the thorny problem of Irish historiography to the philosophies of historians saying that

Informing the concern with cultural and political reconciliation, the philosophies of the revisionist historians and their critics are divided about how to deal with the traumatic and tragic aspects of the Irish past. On the one hand, revisionist historians tend to work according to the premise that a more positive version of the past—in particular when it comes to dealing with the harsh policies and insensitiveness of British governments, landlords, and Unionist leaders—may help to overcome sectarian bitterness. On the other hand, the philosophy of their critics is implicitly based upon a more skeptical attitude that reconciliation between two groups who have for so long distrusted and opposed one another cannot be achieved simply by the retelling of history, but rather by the need to face up to historical wrongs and face them (169-170).

The Great Irish Famine is definitely one of the most controversial and emotional events in Irish history, which resonates among the Irish to this day and is associated with the oppression and cruelty of the British politicians of the day. What is more, competing interpretations found in the histories of the Irish Famine can pose problems to readers. Therefore, perusing histories dealing with this event we have to bear in mind differences that exist in Famine historiography, as this will allow us to fully understand them and know why a given author writes in a particular way. We also should not reject out of hand books written by historians belonging to one or other school of thought, as they can be thought-provoking and contain valuable information despite being biased. The most important thing is to be able to discern a myth from a historical fact.

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