

See no evil:

Representations of suffering during the Great Irish Famine

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This article will compare two artefacts that portray the events of An Gorta Mór (The Great Irish Famine) of 1845-1852.¹ These comprise a journal written by Oxford students, Dufferin and Boyle, who journeyed to Skibbereen in West Cork in 1847, in their desire to have a personal experience of the reputed condition of the people, and a painting by a Cork Artist, Daniel Macdonald: An Irish Peasant Family Discovering the Blight of their Store (1847). Analysis of these artefacts will interrogate the reasons why the written word was 'allowed' to reveal truths that may have been censored in a visual image. Factors that will be considered as salient are 'objective' representations, intellectual motivation and intended audiences, alongside notions of aesthetic propriety. It will be argued that, although British Victorian society might have considered it acceptable for select audiences to be appraised of 'unfortunate realities', society in general needed to be protected and indeed encouraged in its desire to 'see no evil'.

In 1847, while William Makepeace Thackeray was commencing publication of his satirical odyssey of vanity and greed,² two Oxford students in their early twenties embarked upon a very different journey – one far more dangerous to their lives, if not their souls, than that of Becky Sharp. Frederick Hamilton-Temple Blackwood, Baron Dufferin and Claneboye and the Hon. George Boyle, later to become 6th Earl of Glasgow, decided to visit the small market town of Skibbereen in West Cork to assess the situation of the Irish peasants for themselves. These were the same peasants that Thackeray had described as 'raggedy' 'blackguards' whom he found so 'disgusting' that he 'could not give a halfpenny' on his travels through West Cork in 1842.³ Subsequent to their journey, Dufferin and Boyle published a booklet recounting their findings, framed in the form of an open letter: *Narrative of a Journey from Oxford to Skibbereen During the Year of the Irish Famine* (Fig.1).⁴ It gives no indication of their motives but the preface emphasises the desire for their findings to be seen as 'accurate' and that they have attached their names to the publication in the hope that they will be a 'sufficient guarantee for the truth of everything related from *'personal'* observation.⁵ There had been significant coverage of the Irish famine in the British and Irish press, most notably articles and drawings in *the Illustrated London News* (ILN) and a letter directed to the Duke of Wellington by a Cork JP, Nicholas Cummins, relaying the desperate plight of Skibbereen which was published in *The Times* on 24 December 1846.⁶ However, the press spoke to various agendas and it may be that the idea of personal

¹ 'An Gorta Mór' translates as 'The Great Hunger'.

² William Makepeace Thackeray, *Vanity Fair* (London: Punch/Bradbury & Evans, January 1847- July 1848).

³ William Makepeace Thackeray, *The Irish Sketch-Book. 1842. By Mr M. A. Titmarsh* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1843), p. 96.

⁴ Lord Dufferin and the Hon. G. F. Boyle, *Narrative of a Journey from Oxford to Skibbereen During the Year of the Irish Famine 1847* (Oxford: John Henry Parker, 1847).

⁵ *Ibid.*, Preface. Original italics.

⁶ Cecil Woodham-Smith, *The Great Hunger: Ireland 1845-1849* (New York: E. P Dutton, a Division of Elsevier-Dutton, 1980), p. 162.

witness authenticity appealed to earnest young men. With them they took £50 that had been collected from fellow students to donate to Skibbereen funds.

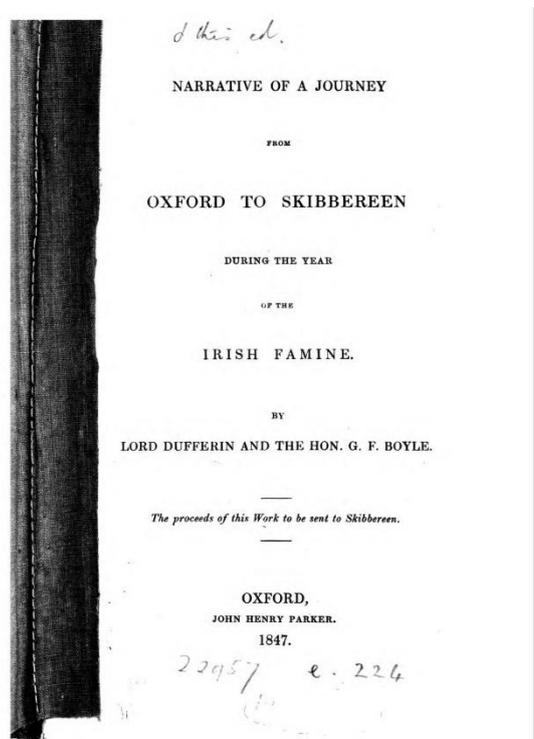


Figure 1: Lord Dufferin and the Hon. G. F. Boyle, *Narrative of a Journey from Oxford to Skibbereen During the Year of the Irish Famine* (1847), book, (image courtesy of the Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford)

The narrative describes their arrival in Dublin and the consequent journey that progressively revealed increased levels of poverty and distress the further south-west they travelled.⁷ Entering Skibbereen they were faced by the worst sights they had hitherto seen, being greeted by ‘nine or ten deal coffins, of which before we had occasionally observed single specimens’ and by ‘numbers of the most wretched beings one ever had beheld, not so much clamouring for alms, as looking on in listless inactivity.’⁸ They sought out the protestant clergyman, Mr. Townsend,⁹ who gave them a summary of the bleak situation; ‘the whole population was being destroyed’ and ‘from the frequency of deaths [...] it was found impossible any longer to perform the accustomed rites of the Church.’¹⁰ He also outlined overwhelming overcrowding in the Union (workhouse) where ‘there were generally three or four in each bed, a man recovering lying between

⁷ For statistical and demographic facts on the severity of the famine see: *Atlas of the Great Irish Famine, 1845-1852*, ed. by John Crowley, William J. Smyth and Mike Murphy (Cork: Cork University Press, 2018), pp. 115, 146.

⁸ Dufferin and Boyle, p. 9.

⁹ Rev. Richard Boyle Townsend died of typhus in the ‘discharge of his duty’ in May 1850. Cited in Terri Kearney and Philip O’ Regan, *Skibbereen: The Famine Story* (Skibbereen: Macalla Publishing, 2015), p. 44.

¹⁰ For a detailed description of Irish funeral practices prior to the famine see: Niamh Ann Kelly, *Ultimate Witnesses: The Visual Culture of Death, Burial and Mourning in Famine Ireland* (Quinnipiac: Quinnipiac University Press, 2017), pp. 10-18.

two others in the height of raging fever.¹¹ Because of the overcrowding, many were turned away from the workhouse and were forced to

lie on the damp mud floors of their cottages. [...] Some had even died in this uncared for condition, and their dead bodies had lain putrifying [sic] in the midst of the sick members of their families, none strong enough to remove them, until the rats and decay made it difficult to recognise that they were human beings.¹²

Townsend proceeded to take them on a tour of the locality where they peered into hovels that were deemed to be less likely to be contaminated by infection, but which revealed shocking and extreme poverty. They saw one woman who had been relatively prosperous prior to the famine, crouching near a few embers of fire, 'drawing her only solace from its scanty warmth; she was suffering from diarrhoea.'¹³

The tour continued to include the graveyard where bodies

had been daily thrown in, many without a coffin, one over another [...], the survivors not even knowing the spot where those most dear to them lay sleeping.¹⁴

They subsequently witnessed a dead woman being flung onto a cart, covered only by a

tattered yellow rag [...] not sufficient however to cover the whole length of the figure, or prevent one's seeing the livid lifeless arms as they hung down swinging and knocking against the ground.¹⁵

The young men subsequently visited the Catholic priest and the local doctor, Daniel Donovan.¹⁶ Both confirmed all that Townsend had told them and what they had witnessed themselves. Doctor Donovan related another highly distressing incident of a couple overtaken by the fever:

[...] the wife died, and the husband had just enough strength to crawl out and bury her in the garden. [...]. The following day one of his neighbours brought back the head of the unfortunate woman, saying, 'that his dog had brought it home!'¹⁷

Having seen more than enough to confirm the desperate situation, the students decided to return to Dublin and while the carriage was being prepared, ordered a large quantity of bread to distribute to the poor that they met as they journeyed back. Food was readily available, but peasants could not afford to buy it. The food was to be delivered to the hotel; however, word spread amongst the people who were

¹¹ Dufferin and Boyle, pp.10-11.

¹² Ibid., p. 11.

¹³ Ibid., p. 13.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 15.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 18.

¹⁶ For a detailed account of the dedicated life of Daniel O' Donavon see: Philip O' Regan, *Dr Daniel O' Donovan-heroic figure of the Famine in Skibbereen* (<https://skibbheritage.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Dr-Donovan-Hero-of-the-Famine-in-Skibbereen-.pdf> [accessed 20 January 2020]).

¹⁷ Dufferin and Boyle, p. 21.

soon thronging the hotel, ‘to a number of 100 or 200, mostly women. It was a frightful sight [...]’ Without a hope of distributing the bread in a fair and safe way they ended up throwing it out of the window:

One can never forget what followed; the screaming, the swaying to and fro of the human mass, as it rushed in the direction of some morsel, [...] and above all the insatiable expression of the crowd as it remained unsatisfied and undiminished at the exhaustion of our loaves – for what were they among so many!¹⁸

The published booklet ran into three print runs in 1847 and all proceeds were sent to Skibbereen.¹⁹ The account is shocking, even to the modern desensitised reader, and yet there is an innocent quality about it. There appears to be no artifice, no stylisation; they describe the dead as those who, ‘lay sleeping’ despite the horrific manner of their interment.²⁰ It could have been a letter written to their families from a Grand Tour, but this tour included hell and was certainly not for consumption by polite Victorian society. As already mentioned, similar descriptions had appeared in the press in the form of articles and letters but were subject to editorial agendas. It appears that the authors of the booklet hoped that their standing as gentlemen would guarantee their honest reportage and their ‘personal’ witness would give an unbiased and ‘objective’ account; as if providing ‘snapshots’ on a documentary shoot. As gentlemen, they appeared to feel it appropriate to render realistic descriptions, which would normally be beyond the scope of polite discussion, in the interests of truth. It may be a testimony to their youthfulness that they did as it was often considered that graphic descriptions turned the reader/listener away, rather than encouraging empathy. It was for this reason that Edmund Burke, though earnestly reporting to the Commons on the Bengal famine of 1770, felt unable to describe what he saw, deciding to ‘leave it to your general conceptions.’²¹

Nonetheless, where verbal descriptions were ‘allowed’ to straddle the fence of decency, visual representations fell under much stricter codes. Although technically possible, no photographs were taken of the famine victims. Sketches appeared in journals which showed harrowing poverty but stopped at the reality of starvation. These were often accompanied by text that described more accurately.²² As O’ Sullivan suggests, this artistic ‘delicacy’ may have been to protect the dignity of the peasants, because the artists lacked the requisite skills to draw emaciation or because there was an unspoken chasm between what could be read and what could be viewed – or indeed for all of these reasons.²³

¹⁸ Dufferin and Boyle, p. 22.

¹⁹ It has not been possible to ascertain how many copies were published in each print run.

²⁰ Dufferin and Boyle, p. 15.

²¹ Edmund Burke, *Works iii* (London: George Bell, 1901), pp. 160-161. Cited in Luke Gibbons, *Limits of the Visible: Representing the Great Hunger* (Quinnipiac: Quinnipiac University Press, 2013), p. 13.

²² For example: image and text of Woman Begging at Clonakilty, in *The Illustrated London News*, February 13, (1847). Cited in Niamh O’ Sullivan, *The Tombs of a Departed Race: Illustrations of Ireland’s Great Hunger* (Quinnipiac: Quinnipiac University Press, 2014), pp. 40-41.

²³ O’ Sullivan, *The Tombs of a Departed Race*, pp. 11-24.

In 1847 Daniel Macdonald, a painter from Cork, then living in London, exhibited a painting depicting a famine scene at the British Institution (Fig.2).²⁴



Figure 2: Daniel Macdonald, *An Irish Peasant Family Discovering the Blight of their Store* (1847), oil on canvas, 83.82 × 104.14 cm, (University College, Dublin, image courtesy of The National Folklore Commission, University College, Dublin)

The painting depicts a family's devastation at finding the blight in their only food supply. The tableau appears somewhat 'staged': the woman in the foreground is 'theatrically' overcome by grief and despair, the little dog gazing anxiously at her. Her husband looks desolately into an empty horizon whilst two of the children stare at the blighted crop. An older generation stand at the back; the woman, as O' Sullivan points out, is already shrouded whilst her husband stares out of the canvas. O' Sullivan also suggests that the dwarf like character in the background and the baby on the ground are 'incongruous'.²⁵ Another incongruity lies in the robustness of the characters, who look well fed and although the father and small daughter are ragged, the wife is well dressed. The painting was executed well into the famine period but even if set in 1845, the people shown are descending into poverty and not on the brink of subsistence as most were, following multiple smaller crop failures in previous years. Whilst relatively prosperous people

²⁴ Niamh O' Sullivan, *In the Lion's Den: Daniel Macdonald, Ireland and Empire* (Quinnipiac: Quinnipiac University Press, 2016), p.127. Macdonald is sometimes referred to in citations as MacDonald however, O' Sullivan's spelling has been followed in this article.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

did become destitute, the title refers to a 'peasant family'. The setting is 'authenticated' by a realistic *sleán* (turf spade)²⁶ and a dramatic, picturesque Irish landscape, but the storm clouds are almost upon them.

Macdonald was making quite a name for himself as a London society portrait artist²⁷ and yet he chose to exhibit what must have been a contentious piece at a prestigious venue; O'Sullivan suggests that this was the only work directly depicting the famine painted at the period.²⁸ In Ireland he had gained success in painting scenes from Irish rural life and folklore such as *The Fairy Blast* (1842) and *The Fighter* (1844).²⁹ He was well acquainted with the lives of peasant people and seemingly retained a regard for their plight. There are thus a number of issues worth considering in respect of 'what is being shown' in this painting and perhaps more importantly 'what is not'. It shows a family facing potential starvation, but they remain dignified if distraught. This must be seen against a common British trope of showing the Irish peasant as lazy, brutish, drunken and even simian in appearance.³⁰ Dunne suggests that the young child beside the brown pitcher is a reference to a Gainsborough 'fancy' picture thus suggesting something of a lost idyll.³¹ However, there are darker portents; is the seemingly 'abandoned' baby foreshadowing her perilous fate?³² The child and the father are becoming dishevelled. The elderly woman is in funeral garb. The potatoes rot before our eyes as the old man stares accusingly at the viewer and who *is* the dwarf figure? Is he a malignant *puccá* (faerie) enjoying the bad luck that has unfairly befallen them? Before long the beautiful landscape, and they within it, will be covered in the swirling darkness that is entering 'stage right'. What then does Macdonald leave out? He does not show the wife (or the eldest daughter) in rags. In a society where the female body was covered from top to toe, the degradation felt by peasant women who could no longer cover their nakedness was intense.³³ James Mahony was a prolific illustrator/reporter for *ILN* and generally depicted the suffering he witnessed with as much dignity as possible. While his sketches do show children in rags, it was not until as late as December 1849 that he drew Bridget O' Donnel half-naked in tattered clothes.³⁴ Thus it would seem that Macdonald too wished to protect this notional peasant's dignity and self-esteem, so that she is not thought too degraded to merit sympathy; that she is recognisable as a person and not a semi-human of no consequence. It is perhaps for this reason that he shows no starving or fever-stricken people; no barren landscape, no tumbled down cottage or people dying in ditches and

²⁶ Tom Dunne, 'Daniel MacDonald (1821-1853): The Discovery of the Potato Blight in Ireland', in *Whipping the Herring: Survival and Celebration in Nineteenth Century Irish Art*, ed. by Peter Murray (Cork, The Crawford Art Gallery and Gandon Editions, 2006), p. 122.

²⁷ O' Sullivan, *In the Lion's Den*, p. 33.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 144.

³⁰ O' Sullivan, *Tombs of a Departed Race*, p. 32.

³¹ Dunne, p. 122 refers to Gainsborough's *Cottage Girl with Dog and Pitcher* (1785), (National Gallery of Ireland).

³² For infant mortality rates see: Crowley et al, *Atlas of The Great Irish Famine*, p. 198.

³³ For a discussion on poverty and moral degradation see: Linda Nochlin, *Misère: The Visual Representation of Misery in the 19th Century* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2018), pp. 27-60.

³⁴ 'Bridget O' Donnel and Children', *ILN*, December 22 (1849). Cited in O' Sullivan, *Tombs of a Departed Race*, pp. 23-24.

the dog remains a cute family pet, not a marauding scavenger. This is not a documentary but is it less affecting for all of that?

Dunne summarises Macdonald's painting thus:

The family faces starvation, and the picture is a sincere attempt to convey the horror of the situation to English viewers and so elicit their sympathy. Using the conventions of contemporary sentimental painting (and the tradition of depicting 'the deserving poor') to achieve this was understandable and indeed essential.³⁵

It was *essential* it seems for the artist but not for the author. Dufferin and Boyle's booklet sold out twice and so did not completely repel by its candid descriptions. Was that because readers could not, or did not want to, translate the words into images and devised distancing mechanisms in order to process the information and render it 'bearable'; readers who were braver than Burke's audience of the 'general conceptions' but not ready to face the 'witness status' of the viewer? In the face of visual representation of atrocity, Kozloff argues that, 'It is not so much in the [artist's] eye but in that of the beholder that the experience is decisively shaped.'³⁶ Berger expresses the relationship between the artist and what he paints similarly:

Every artist discovers that drawing [...] is a two-way process [...]. When the intensity of looking reaches a certain degree, one becomes aware of an equally intense energy coming towards one, through the appearance of whatever it is one is scrutinizing [...]. It is a ferocious and inarticulated dialogue. To sustain it requires faith. It is like burrowing into the dark, a burrowing under the apparent.³⁷

There appears to be a symbiotic relationship between artist, artwork and viewer that is not present in the reading of 'evidence' no matter how accurate it is. Gibbons states;

It is true that by putting a human face on suffering and appealing to the senses, images give the lie to the more abstract, statistical accounts of famine [...]³⁸

Yet Dufferin and Boyle's account was not statistical but very personally harrowing and their desire was to reveal the truth. But does it reveal the same truth as Macdonald's painting or simply reveal it in a different way – in that words are 'noisy' while images are 'silent'? The Skibbereen Heritage Centre contains a detailed and affecting account of the local famine history. It depicts the desperate overcrowding in the workhouse thus: on a wall is a list of names of sixty-seven men, women and children who died between 18 and 30 December 1846. On the floor directly below the list, a black square (less than a metre across)

³⁵ Dunne, p. 122. It is important to note that the Irish peasant was frequently described as 'undeserving'.

³⁶ Max Kozloff, *Renderings: Critical Essays on a Century of Modern Art* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1968), p.289. Cited in O' Sullivan, *Tombs of a Departed Race*, p. 13.

³⁷ John Berger, *Keeping A Rendezvous* (New York: Vintage International, 1992), p. 127.

³⁸ Gibbons, p. 14.

is painted, illustrating the space each inhabitant had to themselves. The scene is presented with a Beckett-like silence. In discussing the ‘ethics of representation’ Gibbons suggests that there is

[...] a need to take account of the spectator in rendering the point of view of the victim. It is this two-way process in the dynamics of vision that is of central importance, for it implies that so far from negating experience, a certain reticence or refusal ‘to show all’ is required if an image is to elicit an ethical rather than a sensational (or even sentimental) response in the end.³⁹

As in Berger’s account of working in darkness, perhaps Macdonald’s reticence encourages the viewer to think for themselves; to let the absences speak for themselves. Mac Suibhne’s title, ‘Subjects Lacking Words’⁴⁰ is illustrative here, for Macdonald’s dignified silence appears to be a truthful medium for depicting a people who had no voice and left no trace, not even a marker for their graves.

It appears that Dufferin, Boyle and Macdonald shared an agenda: to elicit sympathy for the starving peasants and encourage a charitable response, even if a political one was beyond their scope or desire. The students believed that as ‘gentlemen’ their words would be believed, and their status permitted them to reveal what they saw as an ‘objective’ account. It is unclear what ‘success’ the booklet actually had although Dufferin himself donated £1000 to the Skibbereen Relief Fund.⁴¹ It may be ingenuous to ascribe a deliberately thematic silence to Macdonald’s work because he was undoubtedly pushing the boundaries of the acceptable aesthetics of the period. He would have also wished to sell the painting.⁴² As it happened, it was not particularly well received.⁴³ Ultimately the impact of these works may have been more to do with the arenas in which they functioned. Although emphasising a lack of political motive, Dufferin and Boyle’s journal could be read in male discursive society or ‘clubland’ where men of the world could debate current affairs and even admit sympathy, providing the interests of the Empire were not compromised. Macdonald’s painting, however, would be viewed by polite society, which included women, whose sensibilities must not be upset. But there was ever the danger that the subjective response such a painting might elicit would encourage the audience to ‘burrow under the apparent’ and see the evil that lay within.

³⁹ Gibbons, p.13.

⁴⁰ Breandán Mac Suibhne, *Subjects Lacking Words: The Gray Zone of the Great Famine* (Quinnipiac: Quinnipiac University Press, 2017).

⁴¹ Kearney and O’ Regan, p. 32.

⁴² The painting’s provenance is only listed from 1966 when Cecil Woodham-Smith bought it at Christies from a private owner and donated it to the National Folklore Commission. O’ Sullivan, *In the Lion’s Den*, p.130.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp. 76-77.

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