



**Assess the influence of social and political context on the changing perceptions on the causes and significance of The Irish Potato Famine.**

### Synopsis

Upon hearing the Irish Potato Famine referred to as a 'genocide', I became immediately intrigued to research the causation of the Famine. This research led to the discovery of multifarious perceptions beyond what I had presumed was a mere 'lack of potatoes'. However, there were gaps regarding the reasons behind the juxtaposing perceptions of the Famine. By first recognising a connection between the nationalist narrative and the British-Irish tension, I began to recognise the influence of social and political context on the changing perceptions. As such, in response to the historical inquiry "*Why have approaches to the construction of history changed over time?*", this essay chronologically assesses the specific motivations for intentions and nature of the three main schools of Irish history.

To achieve a comprehensive discussion, both academic and popular historians were utilised to exemplify the contrasting perceptions of the Famine. At least one historian for each perception contributed its development or transition from another perception. For the nationalist narrative, the development of its social and political framework is exemplified by popular historian John Mitchel in his radical claims of genocide. To illustrate the contextual influence, this was examined in relation to the wars of Independence in Ireland and strive for Irish home rule. The most significant influence of the revisionist argument was the 'Troubles in Northern Ireland' which heightened the perception's political agenda, and was therefore used to support the transition from the nationalist popular history to the revisionist academic construction. Finally, the intellectual freedom enabled by the attempts to secure peace in Ireland, and thus the contextual influence was highlighted by Cormac Ó Gráda. Therefore the selected context was included as evidence for the conclusion that context is paramount to the construction of history over time, and were extremely influential for the differing school of thoughts.



## Essay

Between 1845 and 1852, over one million people in Ireland died and almost two million emigrated as a result of 'The Irish Potato Famine'. The *Phytophthora Infestans* potato blight reached Ireland from America in 1845, severely limiting the accessibility of potatoes, the staple food of the lower classes. Also known by its Irish name *An Gorta Mór* ('The Great Hunger'), there is a lot of controversy surrounding the predominant cause and significance of the tragedy. This is largely attributed to the differing social and political contexts which have shaped the purpose and methodology of historians over time. Firstly, in the late 1800s, nationalist historians politicised the Famine, antagonising the British government for their adverse impact whilst emphasising the suffering of Irish victims. This was immensely influenced by the rebellion for Irish independence and was framed by the historical Anglo-Irish tension. Conversely, revisionist historians evade the significance of the Famine to tactically minimise British responsibility, influenced by the partitioning of Ireland and the Northern Ireland 'Troubles'. Further, the conclusion of the 'Troubles' and 150th anniversary of the Famine influenced the post-revisionist perception. These historians revise the subjective claims of nationalism whilst recognising the Famine's significance and impact, without lessening the role of the government. As such, the changing perceptions of The Great Hunger have been profoundly influenced by the contexts in which they were constructed.

The complicated relationship between the English and Irish provides the framework for the nationalist ideology, which was commonly adopted by Irish popular historians in the years succeeding the Famine. The events that preceded the Famine adversely impacted Irish identity as they were reduced to a low status within the British imperial system.<sup>1</sup> This includes the institutionalised sectarian tension between the Irish Catholics and British Protestants in the 17th and 18th century Penal Laws which aimed to suppress the practice of Catholicism in Ireland. The Popery Act in 1703 further restricted the Catholic ownership of land, symbolic of British socio-economic and political power.<sup>2</sup> This led to long-lasting Irish resentment towards the British government as well as the political uniting of Ireland with England under the 1828 Act of Union. A distinct division of identity was thus created between the Irish and English. As such, this social predisposition underlined the public

understanding of the Famine in the belief that the Famine itself was witness to the consistent Irish discrimination. John Mitchel, for example, emphasises the fact that the Famine occurred under British leadership "in the midst of abundance".<sup>3</sup> Likewise, nationalist Canon John O'Rourke stresses the suffering experienced by the paupers in *The Great Irish Famine* (1874):

1846 closed in gloom. It left the Irish people sinking in thousands into their graves under the influence of a famine as general as it was intense and which trampled down every barrier set up to stay its desolating progress.<sup>4</sup>

Some even claimed that the Famine was witness to the British oppression of the Irish race and thus, a genocide.<sup>5</sup> As viewed through a subjective lens shaped by the pre-famine experience, nationalist historians thus stress the suffering and mortality of the victims whilst emphasising the guilt of the British Government. This is described by historian Mohamed Harzallah as "manichean".<sup>6</sup> Consequently, the nationalist perception is undoubtedly influenced by the social context in its reflection of the British-Irish tension, as it simplistically reduces the famine to a case of good vs evil.

The social predisposition towards the Irish Famine was extended by the political conditions of the mid-nineteenth century which underpinned the development of the nationalist school of thought. Testament to the emotive understanding of the Famine and thus lack of academic attention, the early nationalist perception emerged from highly subjective accounts based on traditional beliefs, collective memory and Irish folklore. These were constructed by the Irish people and descendants of the Irish famine. However, John Mitchel, a key leader of the 1848 rebellion in Ireland and self-styled nationalist historian, transformed the existing social framework of the Famine to the public sphere for the nationalist cause.<sup>7</sup> During this time period, parliamentary Irish nationalism gained a following in the campaign for an Irish republic independent of Britain. This included the 1840s Young Irish movement which aimed to achieve Irish home rule, the civil war of independence in Ireland and the 1916 Easter Rising. Conversely, there was reluctance from people within the North of Ireland who favoured the union with Britain<sup>8</sup>. By antagonising the British government and promoting the Famine as a defining event within Irish history, Mitchel insisted the severity of the Irish Famine was as a result of the British imperial



system.<sup>9</sup> This is made event as he expressed his blame with persuasive vehemence, a "million and a half of men, women, and children were carefully, prudently, and peacefully slain by the English government. ... The Almighty indeed sent the potato blight, but the English created the Famine."<sup>10</sup> Mitchel therefore politicised the Famine in a persuasive narrative format which valued political righteousness over historical truth and intended to act as a catalyst for the rebirth of nationalist action and rebellion.<sup>11</sup> It was not until the establishment of the Irish Free State that the nationalist perception began to decline, thereby demonstrating the strong impact of both political and social context on the changing interpretations of The Great Hunger.

When the political and social conditions in Ireland began to significantly change so too did the historical thinking, leading to the revisionist perception of The Great Hunger. The development of the revisionist school of thought was firstly influenced by the decline of nationalism, facilitated by the division of Irish identity. The nationalist cause began to lessen at the signing of an Anglo-Irish treaty which concluded the War of Independence (1919 and 1921) and resulted in the partition of Ireland: the free state Republic of Ireland, and Northern Ireland which remained under the British rule.<sup>12</sup> The attainment of Irish independence, which was central to the nationalist political intentions, reduced the popularity towards this school of thought. The civil war that followed within the Irish Free State (1922-1923), between the treaty supporters and anti-treaty faction, further stunted the growth of the nationalist perspective as the cause became divided. This is recognised by the argument of Nancy J. Curtin that "nationalism requires a single, unifying, myth of the nation, or getting the history wrong", however, this was no longer reflected in the pluralist social reality of Ireland.<sup>13</sup> Rather, there existed a diverse range of variances within Ireland's national identity. Further influenced by the intended scientific validity within Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre's 1929 Annalist school of thought, the revisionist perception aimed to acknowledge the individualism of Ireland through a revised objective and politically-removed understanding of the Irish Famine. This directly countered the nationalist school of thought which had until then sacrificed historical truth in the pursuit of a nation, thereby leading to the rise of the revisionist perception.

This influence of the social conditions is evident in the first phase of revisionism, founded in 1938 when T.W. Moody and R.D. Edwards introduced *Irish Historical Studies*, a technical journal for historians opposing the nationalist myth and pursuing scientific objectivity.<sup>14</sup> As the perception transitioned away from the public sphere in recognition of the pluralist reality, it became more academic in nature. Early revisionists were traditionally trained in British institutions, however, as a result, placed Irish history within a narrow, anglo-centric understanding. This is revealed in their aim to cleanse the historical record of Irish nationalist history, as well as the nature of their argument as they often underplayed the significance of the Great Hunger.<sup>15</sup> For example, *The Great Famine; Studies in Irish History 1845-52* edited by R.D. Edwards and T.D. Williams (1957) universalised the argument by removing human agency in the causation of the Famine (thus absolving the blame of the British Government). They instead insisted the Famine merely catalysed the repercussions of an inevitable outcome:

Human limitations and timidity dominate the story of the Great Famine, but of great and deliberately imposed evil in high positions of responsibility there is little evidence. The really great evil lay in the totality of that social order which made such a famine possible and which could tolerate, to the extent it did, the sufferings and hardship caused by the failure of the potato crop. In other words, no one was really to blame because everyone was.<sup>16</sup>

Hence, the attainment of Irish independence and historical trends within the social context influenced the nature and purpose of the revisionist debate in its acknowledgement of pluralism, although less notably than the nationalist perception of the Famine.

The second phase of the revisionist school of thought surrounding the Irish Famine developed in response to the political conflict in Northern Ireland from 1969 to 1998.<sup>17</sup> As recognised by Tim Pat Coogan, revisionism “became not a matter of revising opinions in the light of new research or new insights, but of dealing with the political climate created by the war in Northern Ireland.”<sup>18</sup> For example, whilst the ‘Troubles’ in Northern Ireland initially developed as civil right related-riots,<sup>19</sup> it escalated into a civil war in Northern Ireland between the Unionists (loyalists) and Republicans; the Unionists were loyal to Northern Ireland’s union with the United Kingdom, while the Republicans wished to unite with

Southern Ireland.<sup>20</sup> Revisionists thus became more direct in attacking the nationalist myth and memory, excluding such sources as 'subjective', as the political unrest and violence was blamed on nationalism rather than the British state and unionist faction. This political motive was heightened further because of the 1966 fiftieth anniversary of the Easter Rising and 1981 Hunger strikes. In this way, the revisionist perception of the Famine evades the significance of the Irish Famine to tactically minimise British responsibility, highlighting uncertainty, placing blame on Irish landlords and the backwards economy, without acknowledging the cause of these issues. For example, revisionist K.B. Knowlton argues in the forward of *The Great Irish Famine*:

Research ... reveals more clearly the limitations of men in office who were unwilling to rise or incapable of rising effectively above the *economic conventions* of their day and struggling with no outstanding success against a disaster that had its *roots deep in Irish history*. The disaster originated in that ordering of human affairs which condemned so many to a life-long dependence on a single crop. The potato economy, the primitive state of agriculture and the bad relations between landlord and tenant were but different expressions of the same evil, poverty.<sup>21</sup>

Therefore, the nature and motivating force behind the revisionist perception of the Famine was significantly influenced as it used the Famine to reduce British blame for the political unrest in Northern Ireland.

The late twentieth century was witness to the stunted growth of revisionism as a result of the changing political and social context from which post-revisionism emerged in the mid-1990s. Significant efforts had been made to secure peace in Northern Ireland since the mid-1980s. The Joint Declaration of Peace occurred in 1993 and the election of Prime Minister Tony Blair in 1997 signalled new negotiations which eventually led to the 1998 Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement that concluded the Troubles in Northern Ireland.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, at the 150th anniversary of the Irish Famine in 1997, Tony Blair apologised on behalf of the British government at the time of the Famine as they "failed their people through standing by while a crop failure turned into a massive human tragedy".<sup>23</sup> Such attempts to secure peace in Northern Ireland and Tony Blair's apology allowed intellectual freedom in the



discussion about the Famine, enabling historians to challenge the subjective and extremist nationalist claims whilst recognising the significance of the Irish Famine in European history. This was therefore undoubtedly pivotal in the decline of revisionism which had found its basis in absolving the British leaders.<sup>24</sup> For example, post-revisionist Cormac Ó Gráda suggested that the Famine was:

the tragic outcome of three factors: an ecological accident that could not have been predicted, an ideology ill geared to saving lives and, of course, mass poverty... Food availability was a problem [but] nobody wanted the extirpation of the Irish as a race.<sup>25</sup>

Consequently, the change in context granted historians the flexibility to recognise the inadequacies of the relief measures without pressure to minimise the role of the British Government in the Famine, which thus aided the development of the post-revisionist school of Irish history.

The divergence of the post-revisionist perception has been additionally influenced by the growing interest in the humanities with the recent historical trends in diaspora, information about ethnic identity, trauma, post-colonialism and memory.<sup>26</sup> Specifically, the increasing knowledge about contemporary issues of poverty and hunger have changed attitudes towards the Famine due to an increased understanding of such issues. For example, popular historian Thomas Keneally compared the Irish Famine to the famines in Ethiopia (1983-1985) and Bengal (1943-1944). He recognised that while the potato blight was the “initiating spark of the famine”, a famine is not merely caused by a lack of food but may have a political cause influenced by “the political will and wisdom of the governments”.<sup>27</sup> Therefore, post-revisionists have revived emotion in the Famine by recognising its significance and the impact on its victims whilst still revising nationalism, being more inclusive of cultural evidence in the use more rational perception. This is highlighted by post-revisionist James Donnelly who argues:

Trevelyan’s decision, never questioned by his superiors, seems to have been based more on his rigid adherence to *laissez-faire* economic doctrines than on a careful assessment of its practical short-term consequences... this refusal to

prohibit exports, even for a limited period, was one of Trevelyan's worst mistakes, although the blame was of course not his alone.<sup>28</sup>

Therefore, the changing social context, which allowed for a more holistic outlook, influenced the transformation from political propaganda to a more inclusive post-revisionist school of thought.

Ultimately, the changing social and political contexts have greatly influenced the development and nature of the perceptions of The Great Hunger. The nationalist school of thought has a political and manichean framework, used to gain support for a rebellion. This is due to its development during the fight for Irish independence in the 19th century. It further reflects the complicated British-Irish relationship as historians blame the British government for the Irish Famine. In addition, the development of revisionism was influenced by the partition of Ireland in the twentieth century as society became increasingly pluralist. This was heightened by the Troubles in Northern Ireland as revisionist historians aimed to cleanse history of the nationalist myth to minimise the blame on the British. Finally, post-revisionist history developed in the late twentieth century as a result of the efforts to bring peace to Ireland and the conclusion of the Troubles in Northern Ireland, granting intellectual freedom to discuss the Famine. This perception of the Irish Potato Famine was influenced by the increasing understanding of natural and man-made disasters, facilitating the change from revisionism to post-revisionism. Therefore, it is clearly evident that the changing perceptions on the causation and significance of the Irish Famine were immensely influenced by the contexts in which they were constructed.

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<sup>1</sup> Cooley Feeley, "Fifteen Years On: An Examination of the Irish Famine Curricula in New York and New Jersey". (D. Litt. dissertation, Drew University, 2014) 24, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/1529183274>.

<sup>2</sup> Samantha Howell, "From Oppression to Nationalism: The Irish Penal Laws of 1695," *Hohonu*, Vol. 14 (2016): 21 - 23

<sup>3</sup> John Mitchel, *The Last Conquest of Ireland (Perhaps)*. (Glasgow: Cameron, Ferguson, 1875), 219. <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.31175007600268>.

<sup>4</sup> Harzallah, "The uses and abuses of History in Ireland", 4.

<sup>5</sup> Feeley, "An Examination of the Irish Famine Curricula," 21- 24.

<sup>6</sup> Mohamed Harzallah, "The Uses and Abuses of History in Ireland: A Manichean Famine Historiography", *Academia*, 2, accessed 28 April 2018, [http://www.academia.edu/2541718/The\\_Uses\\_and\\_Abuses\\_of\\_History\\_in\\_Ireland\\_A\\_Manichean\\_Famine\\_Historiography](http://www.academia.edu/2541718/The_Uses_and_Abuses_of_History_in_Ireland_A_Manichean_Famine_Historiography).



- <sup>7</sup> Brewster, Scott and Crossman, Virginia. *Ireland in Proximity: History, Gender and Space*. (London: Routledge, 2002), 42-51. Google books.
- <sup>8</sup> "A Brief History of Ireland." Living in Ireland, accessed 30 March 2018. [http://www.livinginireland.ie/en/culture\\_society/a\\_brief\\_history\\_of\\_ireland/](http://www.livinginireland.ie/en/culture_society/a_brief_history_of_ireland/).
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid, 42.
- <sup>10</sup> Mitchel, *The Last Conquest of Ireland*, 219.
- <sup>11</sup> Brewster and Crossman. *Ireland in Proximity*, 42-51.
- <sup>12</sup> "Nationalism and the War of Independence," The National Archives, accessed 26 April, 2018, <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/cabinetpapers/themes/nationalism-war-independence.htm>.
- <sup>13</sup> Nancy Curtin, "'Varieties of Irishness': Historical Revisionism, Irish Style," *Journal of British Studies*, Vol. 3. No. 2 (1996): 195-219, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/175799>.
- <sup>14</sup> Kevin Whelan, "The Revisionist Debate in Ireland," *Duke University Press*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (2004): 184, <https://doi.org/10.1215/01903659-31-1-179>.
- <sup>15</sup> Curtin, "Varieties of Irishness", 195
- <sup>16</sup> Gillissen, Christophe. "Charles Trevelyan, John Mitchel and the historiography of the Great Famine". *French Journal of British Studies*, XIX-2 (2014): 195-212, doi:10.4000/rfcb.281.
- <sup>17</sup> Whelan, "The Revisionist Debate in Ireland", 187 - 192
- <sup>18</sup> Tim Pat Coogan, *The Famine Plot*. (USA: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 4.
- <sup>19</sup> Paul Collier and Nicholas Sambanis, *Understanding Civil War: Europe, Central Asia, and other regions*. (World Bank Publications, 2005): 166-168. Google books.
- <sup>20</sup> John Francis Cancellieri, "The Troubles in Northern Ireland". (Senior Theses, paper 2, Fordham University, 2015), 2-3, [https://fordham.bepress.com/international\\_senior/2](https://fordham.bepress.com/international_senior/2).
- <sup>21</sup> Lori Henderson, "The Irish Famine: A Historiographical Review," *Historia*, Vol. 15. (2006): 135, <http://www.eiu.edu/historia/Henderson.pdf>.
- <sup>22</sup> Collier and Sambanis, *Understanding Civil War*, 174 - 180.
- <sup>23</sup> Jason Edwards and Amber Luckie, "British Prime Minister Tony Blair's Irish Potato Famine Apology," *Journal of Conflictology*, vol. 5, issue 1 (2014): 46, [http://vc.bridgew.edu/commstud\\_fac/41](http://vc.bridgew.edu/commstud_fac/41).
- <sup>24</sup> Gillissen, "Charles Trevelyan, John Mitchel and the historiography," 195-212.
- <sup>25</sup> Cormac Gráda, *Ireland Before and After the Famine: Explorations in Economic History, 1800-1925*. (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1988): 137 -138. Google books.
- <sup>26</sup> Marguerite Corporaal, "Writing of the Irish Famine". *Oxford University Press*, (2014): 1. Accessed 25 March 2018. doi:10.1093/OBO/9780199846719-0107.
- <sup>27</sup> Keneally, T. (2010). *Three Famines*. Sydney: The Serpentine Publishing Co. P. 23.
- <sup>28</sup> Gunilla Bexar, "The Great Irish Famine in History-Writing and Prose Fiction: "The Mutual Interplay of Two Narrative Genres"." *Abo Akademi University Press* (2016): 328-329, <http://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-951-765-825-6>.

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