

FROM THE BACK BURNER

From time to time the journal will review an important publication which escaped our attention on its initial appearance. Our first item in this feature of the journal is Christopher Morash's seminal 1995 study, *Writing the Irish Famine*.

Christopher Morash

Writing the Irish Famine

Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995. Hardcover, 222 pages.

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Reviewed by Patrick O'Sullivan

"It is an appalling picture, that which springs up to memory," writes Canon Sheehan of the Irish Famine in his 1905 *Glenanaar*. "Gaunt spectres move here and there, looking at one another out of hollow eyes of despair and gloom. Ghosts walk the land."

Patrick Sheehan was born in 1852. What of the Irish Famine could spring to his memory? The simple answer must be that Sheehan is remembering other literary representations of the Famine.

I first contacted Christopher Morash about the theme of literary representations of the Irish Famine in the early 1990s — when I was planning *The Meaning of the Famine*, the problematic last volume of my series *The Irish World Wide*. Morash kindly sent me a copy of *Writing the Irish Famine* in typescript, and he wrote for my series a chapter based on it. My opening paragraph above is taken from that chapter — a chapter which I have long thought should act as an introduction to the methods and the thought of the full-length volume. I felt then that a problem had been identified and solved with the publication of *Writing the Irish Famine* in 1995. Perhaps it is time to think again about this scholarly gift that Morash has given us — for Morash expects a readership that understands the problem and is willing to work at understanding his solutions.

It is a truism within the study of Irish literature that the writers within the agreed "canon" all but ignore the Irish Famine. The disguised demons in Yeats' play *The Countess Cathleen* speak the language of "political economy" turned into verse. One harangue by the

Citizen in James Joyce's *Ulysses* is, like Patrick Sheehan's memory, a conflation of earlier Famine texts: "Even the grand Turk sent us his piastres..." (This reference was clarified by Christine Kinealy's chapter on charity and philanthropy in *The Meaning of the Irish Famine*). But, really, you are hunting for instances. In *Writing the Irish Famine* Morash's fine scholarship demonstrates ways of reading, understanding and valuing what is called "minor literature" — with generous acknowledgement to David Lloyd's *Nationalism and Minor Literature* (1987).

The seven chapters of Morash's book fall into three broad sections: Progress, Apocalypse, and Claiming the Dead. Morash applies the resources and methods of newer literary criticisms to a genuine problem within Irish historiography and the study of Irish literature — the strange patterns, underlying assumptions, and underlying theologies ("progress," "national sin") within writing about the Irish Famine. The works Morash helps us to read include literary texts by familiar and unfamiliar writers such as Carleton, Trollope, Mangan, John Mitchel, Aubrey de Vere and Samuel Ferguson — but he also goes further to reveal how such texts interact with histories, sermons, and, in an important chapter on Malthus, with economic treatises.

The book is a difficult but exciting "litcrit" read. For example, when Barthes talks about an intertextual archive which is "anonymous, untraceable, and nevertheless already read" (5); when Greenblatt acknowledges "the desire to speak with the dead" (7); when Ricoeur speaks of "the interweaving of history and fiction" (12); when Foucault talks about "the great confinement" (65); when Ricoeur says that victimisation "reveals the scandal of every theodicy of history" (141); when Benjamin talks about "even the dead" not being safe (153); when Jonathan Culler quotes George Eliot on "the present causes of past effects" (166); when Benjamin talks about remembrance salvaging the future from "homogenous, empty time" (180); when de Man, on

Epitaphs, suggests that by “making the dead speak ... the living are struck dumb” (182); when Todorov talks about genres being “revelatory” of ideology (185); and when Lyotard speaks of an aesthetic “which denies itself the solace of good forms” (186), they might well be talking about “writing the Irish Famine.” In other words, Morash clarifies themes and problems within current literary criticism by using that criticism’s techniques to clarify the problematic literary and historiographic legacy of the Famine.

Part of the difficulty of reading — or teaching — Morash’s book is that his arguments are close, hard and subtle. His own text follows the movement of thought in the texts under study — which were written in times of crisis and despair. Or in times of hard complacency. Perhaps another fine and difficult book to be put alongside Morash’s is Peter Gray’s *Famine, Land and Politics* (1999). Working within the traditions of British political history, Gray reads another series of difficult texts, the British political record, and finds that these texts, while seeming to offer economic theory, in fact offer theology. Thus Gray is able to cite Morash’s *Writing the Irish Famine*, on the notion of “progress,” in Trollope’s novels — Gray is then free to study Trollope’s six *Examiner* letters and their resolute defence of British Government policy in “the circumstances ordained by Providence.”

Morash has grounded our understanding of those contradictory “historical metanarratives,” progress, apocalypse, and their unstable reconciliation in a Protestant theology of “national sin.” Individuals who sin will meet retribution in the next life, but the sins of nations must be punished in the present world (91). It is a fearsome thing about theology that it can be at the same time entirely logical and quite mad. But which nation is the sinner, and which is sinned against? Having acknowledged the exegesis of *Revelations* by Charles Walmesley, which was popularised as the prophecies of “Pastorini” and the *aisling* tradition, Morash then shows nationalist and/or Catholic poets hijacking a theology which offered no clear route forward for orthodox bourgeois nationalism and which was at odds with orthodox Catholicism.

Through Morash’s skilful use of different kinds of knowledge, he demonstrates these processes at work in

individual poems and individual lives. He guides us through the works of Mangan and acknowledges Lloyd. He introduces the work of John Frazer, a Protestant nationalist, a cabinet-maker and contemporary of Mangan. Frazer’s apocalyptic 1848 poem “The Three Angels” offers grim “angels” of pestilence, war and famine and is set alongside Yeats’ cheerful demons. But then Frazer takes us on to consider emigration, and diaspora — for a year later he is writing “The Artisan’s Apology for Emigrating”: “No flame-armed angel of GOD we obey ... dark spectres of death compel us away....” And then there is the Morash touch — the precise placing of the individual understanding and experience within theory. “‘History,’ observes Fredric Jameson, ‘is what hurts...’” (125).

The book’s last full chapter is entitled “William Carleton and the End of Writing.” Because of Morash’s methodology, I find it intriguing that the book should end with a careful reading of Carleton. Morash explores Carleton and the idea of progress, “authentic” Country Life, ownership of the peasantry “endowed by the Famine with an almost talismanic importance” (157) and explains the narrative collapse in *The Squanders of Castle Squander*.

The “Conclusion: Claiming the Dead” begins: “William Carleton’s ‘Far Gurtha’ can stand as an icon for the whole body of nineteenth-century Famine literature, the haunting projection of the absent Famine dead....” And near the end, it says, “Castle Squander can be read as an unwitting, unwilling postmodern text beyond the control of formal closure in its struggle to present the unrepresentable....”

Throughout the Irish Diaspora, there were, from the anniversary years 1995 onwards, efforts made to erect monuments to the dead of the Irish Famine, projects which had perhaps to do with bringing into the present the absent Famine dead. Such examples that automatically come to mind are those in Grosse Ile, Boston, Liverpool, Sydney and New York. We can respect those monuments, and respect those efforts — but we can also wish that some of that effort had gone into a reading of Christopher Morash’s *Writing the Irish Famine*.

—University of Bradford