

Gone with the Spud

The Political, Economic, and Cultural Effects of the Irish Potato Famine

Sitting in one of the front windows of Áras an Uachtaráin, Residence of the President, a candle has burned since the President of Ireland, Mary Robinson, first began the tradition in the 1990s. The candle brightly shined for everyone to see as they passed on the road in Phoenix Park, Dublin. It has become a beacon for the descendants of those who fled during the Famine, as if to say, “Welcome Home.” While the Famine occurred more than a hundred and fifty years ago, it is not far from the minds of the descendants of those who were left behind. The effects have molded and shaped Ireland into the country that it is today, and it will continue to influence future generations to come, as the stories of how the Irish remained resilient despite the odds are passed on. The political, economic, and social events during the Irish Potato Famine of 1845 influenced and contributed to the culture of Ireland, creating nationalism and the free nation that it is today.

To fully understand the Famine, as dubbed by the Irish today, an examination of the events leading up to the starvation period must be made, which include the politics of Ireland in the years before the mid-1840s. From the time that the Normans invaded Ireland in the twelfth century, the Irish had been under subjugation.¹ They attempted several uprisings, but none gained them independence from their island neighbors. The end of the Irish Rebellion of 1798, which resulted in a British victory, saw the creation of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland with the passing of the Acts of Union in 1800. The Prime Minister William Pitt, the Younger, proposed the Acts with the belief that the best way to prevent any future uprisings and

¹ Aidan Doyle, *A History of the Irish Language: From the Norman Invasion to Independence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 14.

strengthen the ties between them both would be to unite them together. Pitt's ideology subsequently ended the Irish Parliament, merged the two parliaments, and retracted independent freedoms away from the Irish.² Despite this course of events, Irish nationalists continued to gather and brought their ideas into the nineteenth century.

In the 1840s, the Young Irelanders surfaced as a nationalist movement to fight for the independence of the Irish people from Great Britain. The movement included using Irish Gaelic as a spoken language and encouraged the study and research of Irish history to better understand themselves as a people and as a nation. Although they began with the goal of creating a political movement, they transitioned over time to focus on changes within the cultural and social realms to instill nationalism. They believed that the best way to create nationalism in Ireland would be to develop a sense of pride in their culture, history, and way of life. Only then could they unite on the common ground of shared nationalism to fight against the British. They led a rebellion in 1848, sometimes known as the Famine Rebellion, which ended in their ultimate demise. Despite their failure, they left behind thoughts of independence against the Crown that grew even as potato crops continued to die.³

The Young Irelanders and Ireland faced an economic downturn, largely contributed to by the change in population. The end of the eighteenth century in Ireland saw a rapid increase in birthrate. In 1767, the population ranged somewhere around 2 ½ million citizens, and by the turn of the century, it had reached five million.⁴ Though there have been several theories about why this population growth occurred, many attributed it to potatoes. As more people discovered their benefits, they became dependent upon them, increasing their nutritional intake and promoting

² J.C. Beckett, *The Making of Modern Ireland, 1603-1923* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973), 268-283.

³ Beckett, 332-335.

⁴ Gearóid Ó Tuathaigh, *Ireland Before the Famine 1798-1848* (Dublin: Gill and MacMillan LTD, 1972), 5.

fertility. Research has found that the population growth became the most prominent among the lower class, consisting of laborers and cottiers. And just as their numbers increased, so did their state of poverty.⁵

As the population grew, so did the number of unemployed. *The Report of 1836*, composed by the Royal Commission of Great Britain to ascertain the conditions of Ireland within the lower classes, "...estimated that the number of labourers who were unemployed for thirty weeks a year was not less than 585,000, whose dependants would number at least 1,800,000."⁶ Factories that began mass producing items in England and selling items for cheaper prices took business away from Irish artisans, as well as the wool, linen, and silk industries. With the added fact that agricultural prices declined for wheat in both Great Britain and Ireland after Waterloo, Ireland entered the 1840s burdened with a weakened and impoverished economy.⁷

Despite the fact that much of Ireland consisted of poor, working-class citizens before the Famine, a thriving culture full of music and dancing breathed within its borders. Fairs, markets, weddings, and wakes alike consisted of music made from fiddles, flutes, harps, and uilleann pipes. Songs like, "Mo Ghile Mear,"⁸ written by Seán Clárach Mac Domhnaill in the style of Aisling poetry, evoked feelings of the culture prior to the Famine. It had been vibrant and full of life, standing out in stark contrast to the economic ruins they lived in. Even the art reflected the culture and society that the upper-class Irish citizens wished to embody, as opposed to their current state. George Barret Senior's eighteenth-century painting, *River Scene with Watermill, Figures and Cows*, represented a romanticized country scene of a figure herding cows across a

⁵ Ó Tuathaigh, 6.

⁶ Ó Tuathaigh, 108.

⁷ Ó Tuathaigh, 19-21.

⁸ Seán Clárach Mac Domhnaill, "Mo Ghile Mear," 18th century.

bridge, with a watermill in the background (see fig. 1).⁹ The cows, the watermill, and the river represent the fertility of the land, while the splendid evocation of green fields and brush are reminiscent of an Irish landscape.

Within any society, there are two forms of culture. What is known as high culture is the one belonging to the elites. Popular culture is absorbed by the majority of a nation, consisting of those within the middle and lower stations of annual income. George Barret Senior's paintings are considered a form of high culture because of their appeal to people within the upper classes. Cartoonist art in newspapers, magazines, and propaganda pamphlets, such as "The Loves of the Fox and the Badger," by Irish artist Henry Brocas, represented popular culture because it influenced the majority of society (see fig. 2).¹⁰ Showcased in the *Exshaw's Magazine*, in 1784, the etching depicted political scenes separated into nine separate boxes, presenting different messages by cartoon animals. Brocas had been selected for the task because his style attracted a general audience.

Although the upper classes within a society preferred their high culture as the recognizable culture of the entire nation, that is not the case. Through the study of popular culture, historians can understand the true nature of society. While the literature, art, and music of the elites in Ireland are essential to understanding a historical aspect of Irish life, it does not reflect the culture of the majority of the country before, during, and after the potato famine, which the vast resources of popular culture can provide.

⁹ George Barret Senior, *River Scene with Watermill, Figures and Cows*, 1700s, oil on canvas, Tate Art Museum, London.

¹⁰ Henry Brocas, "The Loves of the Fox and the Badger," *Exshaw's Magazine* (Dublin, Ireland), 1784.

From the time of the Middle Ages in Ireland when the British started implementing plans to fully bring the Irish under their control, the Irish language lessened to the point that it was only taught in bardic schools, where Irish poets began their training, and in monasteries.¹¹ In 1831, librarian James Hardiman, also known as Séamus Ó hArgadáin, published his book, *Irish Minstrelsy*, which became one of the first books entirely comprised of songs and poems written in Irish.¹² Hardiman gathered the collection together himself, and gave the world a piece of Irish culture, just before the number of people who spoke the native language would decline to the lowest it had ever been.¹³ Spoken Irish would continue to decrease over time, but Hardiman created a meaningful and important medium for the language, laying the foundation for Irish to be instituted back into schools.¹⁴

Before the Famine, the potato had gradually grown in its importance. In 1674, a poem called “Pairlimint Chlainne Thomáis” had been written by an anonymous author, in celebration of a Limerick couple’s marriage. Although penned in Gaelic, in its translation, the verses read, “His wife, under her eyebrow, whereas it was kisses with formality, or a potato that used to salute her before their marriage.”¹⁵ The author wrote in such a way that mentioned the potato alongside a wedding ceremony, symbolizing the importance that it held in the seventeenth century. Over time, the status of the potato increased, becoming a primary source of nutrition for many people.

¹¹ Beckett, 15.

¹² James Hardiman, *Irish Minstrelsy or Bardic Remains of Ireland, with English Poetical Translations* (London: J. Robins, 1831), reprint Shannon: Irish University Press, 1971.

¹³ Reg Hindley, *The Death of the Irish Language: A Qualified Obituary* (London; New York: Routledge, 1990), 19.

¹⁴ Hindley, 157.

¹⁵ Cormac Ó Gráda, *Black '47 and Beyond: The Great Irish Famine in History, Economy, and Memory* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999), 14.

Before the Famine took hold of Ireland, nearly one-third of the entire Irish population had become solely dependent upon potatoes for their source of food.¹⁶ The overwhelming increase of population, general poverty, and the fact that growing potatoes would not take away land from farming wheat, all contributed to the Irish turning to potatoes. Also, potatoes possess a high nutritional content that made them the perfect inexpensive crop for poor laborers, cottiers, and farmers to eat. As stated by Cecil Woodham-Smith in her book, *The Great Hunger*, "...an acre and a half would provide a family of five or six with food for twelve months, while to grow the equivalent grain required an acreage four to six times as large and some knowledge of tillage as well."¹⁷

The western side of Ireland was the most profoundly affected by the Famine, consisting of the most impoverished of Irish citizens in the country. In the center counties, spanning from Cork to Donegal, and in the western counties, including Kerry, Clare, Galway, and Mayo, the most substantial number of poor citizens lived. The population of these counties numbered nearly 2.3 million, and faced the harshest realities of the Famine, having barely enough money to live on prior to the starvation period.¹⁸ Within these westernmost counties belonged the majority of Irish speakers at the time, because they resided further away from English control.¹⁹ While this helped preserve the language for a time, things began to change in the mid-1840s.

The Irish Potato Famine began in 1845 when the potato blight called *phytophthora infestans* took hold and ruined potato crops in Ireland. Other diseases had affected the potato crops in Europe and Ireland prior, but this fungus from arguable origins, hit parts of Europe, but

¹⁶ Ó Tuathaigh, 203.

¹⁷ Woodham-Smith, 35.

¹⁸ James S. Donnelly Jr., *The Great Irish Potato Famine* (Stroud, UK: Sutton Publishing Ltd., 2001), 2-3.

¹⁹ Hindley, 17.

most negatively, Ireland. What set the disease apart from its effects in other countries came in the form of rain, of which Ireland is predominantly known for. The disease also had differing effects in each region.²⁰ Those in the west, who made up the majority of the underprivileged individuals in the country and depended the most profoundly upon their potato crops, not only lost their food but also found it harder to make a living without energy to support their bodies. They became the most affected by the blight, suffering more deaths than in the rest of country.²¹

The first year that the blight attacked, potatoes had still been harvested, despite the infection. The following year, in 1846, the weather had a hand in worsening matters. First, the weather prevented the planting from occurring on schedule, and then a drought at the beginning of the summer caused a further delay in the growing process. By the time August rolled around, an overabundance of rain allowed the spores within the blight to open up, infect the soil, and compromise the potatoes. Since a fungus thrives when introduced to water, this heightened its effects in comparison to the other infected countries.²²

As the blight spread throughout Ireland the first year, it killed off the potato crops and extinguished the primary source of food for around 4.7 million Irish citizens and took away a portion of another 3 million individuals' daily dietary intake.²³ In Ireland's first national journal, the *Freeman's Journal*, it stated in December of 1845 that, "...one-half of the potato crop has been already lost as human food."²⁴ Matters became worse when infected potatoes had been mistakenly used to plant new crops the following year because of a seed shortage, aiding to

²⁰ Donnelly Jr., 41.

²¹ Christine Kinealy, *A Death-Dealing Famine: The Great Hunger in Ireland* (London: Pluto Press, 1997), 40.

²² Donnelly Jr., 42.

²³ Donnelly Jr., 43.

²⁴ *Freeman's Journal*, (Dublin, Dublin), Dec. 1, 1845.

prolong the duration of the failed potato harvests in the coming years. Attempts began to be made to discover the problem behind the blight, but it did not prove to be an easy task, requiring time that Ireland did not have.²⁵

While the potato crops dwindled away in Ireland, the oat crops thrived. Instead of being used as a substitute for the lack of potatoes, the oats harvested in Ireland had been exported to Great Britain instead. People continued to starve, and yet the British Government did not attempt to remedy this because it would not have been profitable to them.²⁶ There can also be no denial that Great Britain knew what had been occurring in Ireland, because ‘Her Majesty’ commanded that scientists, Dr. Playfair and Mr. Lindley inspect the validity of the rumors of crop failure. In their report, Playfair and Lindley informed Parliament that, “...a large field at Skerries, where not more than one Potato in twenty was found lying in a state which would admit of preservation.”²⁷ They went on further to state that as time continued, the crops would completely fail, and while they could not determine how long it would be before Ireland’s entire potato resources would be overtaken by the disease, it would happen, despite their proposed plans to remedy the issue going forward.

When the *Corn Laws* were passed in Great Britain in 1815, it restricted the fluctuation of grain prices making it steeper than it had been before, enforcing tariffs and limiting the importations of food to colonies. It improved the importance that landowners held, enhancing the profits involved, as well as enabling them to make shrewd business moves at the cost of tenants

²⁵ Donnelly Jr., 45.

²⁶ Donnelly Jr., 47.

²⁷ Dr. Playfair, and John Lindley “Irish potato crop, and the prospect of approaching scarcity: report,” *Parliamentary Papers*, Session 1846, Vol. XXXVII, University of Southampton Library (Accessed November 18, 2017), 33.

to increase their land and revenue.²⁸ When the Famine hit Ireland, despite opposition within his party, Prime Minister Sir Robert Peel petitioned for the repeal of the *Corn Laws* to help the Irish. When Parliament complied in 1846, the Famine had progressed more rapidly than the British had anticipated, and the repeal did little to stop its effects.²⁹

The British Government issued public funds to Ireland to assuage the misery that the potato blight caused. Amounting to £9.5 million, the British viewed this as a very substantial contribution, but by the end of 1847, these resources dwindled. After Ireland used every last penny to aid in the suffering of their people, Great Britain did not send any more help. At the same time that government donations dried up, the soup kitchens that had been set up closed down as well, fearing that the famine would go on far longer than anyone had funds to support. Ultimately, beyond the fall of 1847, the Irish had been left on their own to fend for themselves and hope that they survived.³⁰

Despite the lack of attention that the British Government gave to Ireland after 1847, attempts had been made to aid the starving Irish from private individuals in both countries. Charities put together early on in the Famine drew significant help and funds in 1847, 1848, and 1849, in comparison to the following years after that. The longer that the Famine endured, the more those who had contributed to charity towards the beginning began to withdraw their support. Contributors who offered their assistance to the Society of Friends helped avidly in the beginning but began to drop off their support as the Famine continued to drag on. The British Relief System, while a decent thought at first, ran out of funds in 1848.³¹

²⁸ Corn Laws, *British Parliament*, 1815.

²⁹ Cecil Woodham-Smith, *The Great Hunger: Ireland 1845-1849* (New York: Old Town Books, 1962), 42, 49-52.

³⁰ Ó Gráda, 77.

³¹ Ó Gráda, 43.

To assist those without jobs, and those in dire need of food, public works programs had been set up by local officials in Ireland who wanted to assist. Digging deep into their limited funds, they hired workers for fourpence a day to build walls out of stone. In the west of Ireland, stone can be found everywhere, making it easy to acquire, but difficult to carry for weakened laborers dying of starvation. These “famine walls” lined roads, traversed mountains and fields, sometimes going on for miles. Although fourpence did not often cover all of the needs of an Irish family, it aided them for a time, before funds ran out, and workers grew too weak to continue.³²

The shift in public opinion in regards to the Irish did little to support in their aid. Negative cartoons in British newspapers depicted the Irish with a lack of responsibility, blaming them for their plight. In addition, cartoons showed the British as a helpful neighbor, coming to the aid of Ireland. In the eyes of British newspapers, and the people, the blame for the continued famine rested entirely on the Irish. A cartoon etched by Richard Doyle, called “Union is Strength,” showed John Bull, the national symbol of Great Britain, offering a basket of food to a starving Irish family (see fig. 3). At the bottom of the image, Bull said, “Here are a few things to go on with Brother, and I’ll soon put you in a way to earn your own living.”³³ The cartoon blatantly hinted that the Irish could not earn their own living without aid from the British. This type of propaganda in Great Britain created the common thought that they had done their best to help the Irish, but the Irish could not be helped if they did not first help themselves. “Union is Strength” suggested that the Irish would survive the Famine by working, instead of lying around hopeless, waiting for the British to help.

³² Cathal Poirteir, *Famine Echoes – Folk Memories of the Great Irish Famine: An Oral History of Ireland’s Greatest Tragedy* (Dublin; Basingstoke: Gill & Macmillan Ltd, 1995), page not listed.

³³ Richard Doyle, “Union is Strength.” *Punch*, October 17, 1846.

By the beginning of the 1850s, many people fled the country, but of those that remained, many faced evictions from their homes. Before the Famine, a predominant number of Irish citizens belonged to the lower classes. With a loss of food, many could no longer work for lack of strength, and others simply could not afford the increasing prices to lease their land or homes. Some landlords remained lenient with their tenants, but for the most part, mass evictions occurred if the steep prices could not be met. While landlords had more money than their tenants, they faced troubles from the Famine in a lot of the same ways that the poor did. They lived off of potatoes, which meant that they had to spend their money on other food that came at a higher price, being difficult to attain. To compensate, many raised the prices for those living and working off of their land. This displaced families out of their homes and forced them out on their own to face the Famine. Of those evicted, many died, lacking food, a house, and money to flee.³⁴

With the overwhelming amount of death that the Irish experienced in the Famine, many people became immune to the incredible loss of life. Just as anyone who is surrounded by death for an extended period, emotions concerning it can become increasingly removed. These feelings surrounding the dead can be seen in the art, and the music created in Ireland during the Famine years. A poem written by Patrick Carpenter called “Skibbereen,” mournfully went, “Your mother, too, God rest her soul, lay on the snowy ground. She fainted in her anguish of the desolation round. She never rose but went her way from life to death's long dream.”³⁵ The poem later became a song, keeping the memory alive of those who had died.

A few artists immortalized the horrors they saw of the Irish Potato Famine in oil on canvas. One such individual, George Frederic Watts created a painting called “The Irish Famine”

³⁴ Ó Gráda, 45.

³⁵ Patrick Carpenter, “Skibbereen,” 1800s.

in 1850 that portrayed a young family sitting on the side of the road (see fig. 4).³⁶ Using yellows, oranges, and browns, he created a mournful mixture of colors that evoke feelings of sadness as one gazes upon the painting. In the foreground, a young woman sits, looking helplessly at her husband for support. The infant baby in her arms appears dead, its little fingers still grasping at its mothers' breasts for milk. The husband stares blankly, with a slight touch of sadness tugging at his lips. He appears to be looking directly at the viewer, breaching the boundaries of the painting to anyone who may look upon the canvas. Just behind the husband, a figure crouches forward, with their face held in their hands to suggest the deepest feelings of despair. The four individuals are set against the backdrop of a darkened sky to impart the severity of the scene. Watts brilliantly created a realistic image, while inviting those who admire the artwork to share in the pain he portrayed, and somehow leave with an understanding of what had been endured during the Famine.

Irish historian Cormac Ó Gráda, stated, "Mayo's population dropped by 29 percent between 1841 and 1851, with nearly one hundred thousand of its people dying of famine-related causes."³⁷ It is difficult to narrow down an exact amount for the overall death toll in Ireland. Precise birth and death records for every slight population fluctuation had not been kept prior to 1845, and when the death rate rose, it made accurate accounts harder to keep track of. As the Famine waged on, mass graves became a popular choice in burying the dead, with merely a stone cross to mark the burial, and none at all, in some cases.³⁸ Despite this, it has been estimated that

³⁶ George Frederic Watts, *The Irish Famine*, Oil on canvas, 1850.

³⁷ Ó Gráda, 28.

³⁸ Ó Gráda, 40.

one million people lost their lives to the famine, leaving no one exempt from the possibility of the grave, young or old.³⁹

With an increasing lack of food, aid, and jobs, many turned to emigration. Over a million Irish citizens fled their country in the hopes of survival during the Famine. The only food they had for the crossing was what they brought with them, so many had nothing at all, dying on the way. Memories of the crossing are marred with stories of the illnesses that brewed in the close quarters of the hulls, the lack of fresh air, and the problems that came with flippant captains who cared little for their human cargo. Some ships had a captain and crew who looked after the passengers, but the stories of overcrowding and death made many compare what occurred on the Irish emigrant ships to the treatment of African slaves bound for America.⁴⁰

After the Famine, one of the most resounding beliefs among the Irish had been to place the central blame for the death and forced emigration of their fellow countrymen completely with the British. While the British sent Indian corn to feed the Irish towards the beginning of the Famine, they had continued to export wheat and cattle from Ireland for their benefits, instead of distributing them to the Irish. In the eyes of the Irish, despite the initial aid that the British had sent, Great Britain valued their own economics and commercial dealings over the lives of the Irish. This instilled a sense of hatred toward the British, and an innate need for retribution to compensate for all that had been lost because of their poor decisions in regards to the welfare of the Irish.⁴¹ In light of these beliefs, the seeds of nationalism that had been planted by the Young Irish prior to the Famine began to flourish and grow.

³⁹ Ó Gráda, 203.

⁴⁰ Ó Gráda, 105-107.

⁴¹ Kinealy, *A Death-Dealing Famine: The Great Hunger in Ireland*, 13-14.

The Gaelic League, created in 1893, sought to revive Irish as a spoken language, and bring it back to being taught in schools. Created by Eoin MacNeill and Douglas Hyde, they had a vision to create a country in which their native language would be spoken as it had once been before the British and the Famine destroyed the number of Irish-speaking citizens. Nationalists took this movement and began to publicize it to the masses as a means of instilling nationalism by embracing culture. They believed that if the Irish acknowledged their culture, it would set them apart from the British, and define them as their own people and their own country. If the majority of Irish accepted their culture, they would begin to see themselves as different from Great Britain and want to live in a society defined by their own culture, not the rules imposed upon them by the British. These beliefs added to the foundation that would lead Ireland into their fight for freedom.⁴²

Through the promotion of cultural identity and the importance that it held for the Irish, supporters within Ireland began to back the revolution against the British and their control. They recognized that not only had Great Britain attempted to hinder Ireland's cultural identity, especially through limiting the use of the Irish language, but that they also withdrew their aid during the Famine of 1845 through 1852. Add in political disputes spanning over the course of Great Britain's reign over their island neighbor, and a large majority of the Irish felt strongly that they had endured quite enough. It took time for the nationalists to amass a large following, but over the course of their revolution, they would garner enough support to lengthen their fight further than the British had ever thought possible.⁴³

⁴² Marie Coleman, *The Irish Revolution, 1916-1923* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), 16.

⁴³ Coleman, 16-18.

In 1914, Great Britain finally ruled to allow Ireland to have self-rule, but the granting of this had been prolonged because of World War I, which began that same year. In 1916, a few Irish nationalists tipped the scale of Ireland, plunging them into a revolution in what became known as the Easter Rising, taking place on the Monday directly following Easter Sunday, April 25th, 1916. After taking control of a Dublin post-office, they created a ripple effect in Ireland that would lead to the Irish War for Independence, which lasted from 1919 to 1921, and the Irish Civil War, which lasted from 1922 to 1923. In the end, the Irish gained their independence and separated from Great Britain's control, leaving behind Northern Ireland, which stayed within the United Kingdom.⁴⁴

Since the liberation of Ireland from Great Britain, the Irish have embraced their culture, recognizing that it defines who they are as a people and a nation. The Famine is included in that culture, shaping Ireland into what it is today, and the Irish strive to remember those five dark years in as many ways as they can. One of those ways is through poetry. A poem, written by Desmond Egan in 1997 went along the lines of, "...there is famine in our music, famine behind our faces. It is only a field away, has made us all immigrants, guilty for having survived."⁴⁵ Others attempted to remember the Famine through different artistic mediums, but no matter what form chosen, it is quite evident that Ireland wishes to never forget the events that led to them gaining their freedom from Great Britain, changing their country and culture forever.

Running along the side of the River Liffey in Dublin, Ireland, on the Custom House Quay, skeletal statues stand out in shocking contrast against the bustling city around them. Made out of bronze, the golden color of the overtly skinny figures walking sporadically down the

⁴⁴ Coleman, 7-112.

⁴⁵ Desmond Egan, *Famine, A Sequence*, 1997.

sidewalk is reminiscent of the sickly completion their starved bodies would have resembled had they been real people. Designed and constructed by sculptor Rowan Gillespie, it is dubbed *The Famine Memorial* (see fig. 5).⁴⁶ Each carrying their meager belongings with their loose clothing draped over their nearly lifeless forms, they hold varying expressions of pain and sadness, making each one unique. A scrawny dog follows the unruly crowd of statues to remind people that not even the animals had been exempt from the Famine. As tour buses drive by, the inhabitants are told that similar scenes would have occurred during the 1840s and 50s, as famine-stricken Irishmen and women lined along the very same river to board emigrant ships bound for America.

Songs like “1849,” by The Elders keep the memory of the Famine going for those less prone to pay attention to poetry and art.⁴⁷ Written in 2002 and released in 2004, the song reached an entirely new audience, combining traditional Irish folk instruments with The Elders’ rock influences, all while weaving in their poignant lyrics that have never ceased to draw in listeners. Two lines in the song state, “He lost his wife to famine and a younger son too, I know we’ll be united in the Lord’s good time.” Where other songs speak of the famine as a time in the far distant past, The Elders breached the gap by saying that one day, all of the Irish will be united in death. The Famine did not just belong to those who endured its pain and death, it belongs to their descendants as well, to be burdened together. The song creates the belief that one day, the Irish will unite as one nation, and that neither death, time, nor distance can separate and weaken the Irish, for they will rise again, even in death.

⁴⁶ Rowan Gillespie, *The Famine Memorial*, Dublin, 1997.

⁴⁷ The Elders, “1849,” recorded 2004, track 1 on *The Best Crowd We Ever Had*, The Orchard. compact disc.

Despite the fact that potatoes essentially caused the deaths of multitudes in Ireland, forcing many to leave their native land behind in the hopes of survival, potatoes remain prevalent among the Irish. According to Ó Gráda, “Over a century later, an ambitious analysis of working-class consumption in industrial Massachusetts showed the immigrant Irish consuming more potatoes than either American-born workers or other immigrants earning similar incomes.”⁴⁸ This remains as a reminder that customs, just as oral traditions, can be passed down, through the generations. The same can be said of those in Ireland, who are widely known for loving potatoes. For a country and a people who suffered so heavily at the hands of potatoes, they had become so dependent upon them that not even a blight could separate them from their love of potatoes.

Within the ocean rimmed borders of the beloved Emerald Isle, Ireland bears a dark and tragic past that they refuse to hide. The Irish Potato Famine of 1845 through 1852, is publicly recognized, and its victims honorably commemorated in art, monuments, and songs. The Irish choose to embrace this part of their history because it aided in their path to freedom, giving them an added layer of courage to face Great Britain, who they blamed for the mass death and emigration of their people. The Famine instilled a sense of national pride that the Irish grasped whole-heartedly, and Irish Nationalists used to further their cause. They argued that only through the acceptance of Irish culture can nationalism be born, and the British defeated once and for all. While Nationalists used the Famine to push Irish culture and freedom from Great Britain, the Famine created the culture of Ireland. Without the Famine, Ireland would not have embraced their language, art, and literature in the same way that they did, nor would they have chosen to remember the Famine that helped in their fight for independence. The Famine is laced in every part of Irish culture in the twenty-first century, infusing music, literature, art, language, oral

⁴⁸ Ó Gráda, 18.

traditions, food, and national identity. And even as the Famine passes into ancient stories of old, the memory of those who died will go on, their voices echoing in the “famine walls” that span that vast mountains and valleys. Descendants of Irish immigrants will continue to come home in search of the land of their ancestors, and the Famine and the culture it created will live on.

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Fig 1. Barret Sr., George. *River Scene with Watermill, Figures and Cows*. 1700s, oil on canvas, Tate Art Museum, London. <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/barret-river-scene-with-watermill-figures-and-cows-t01881>.

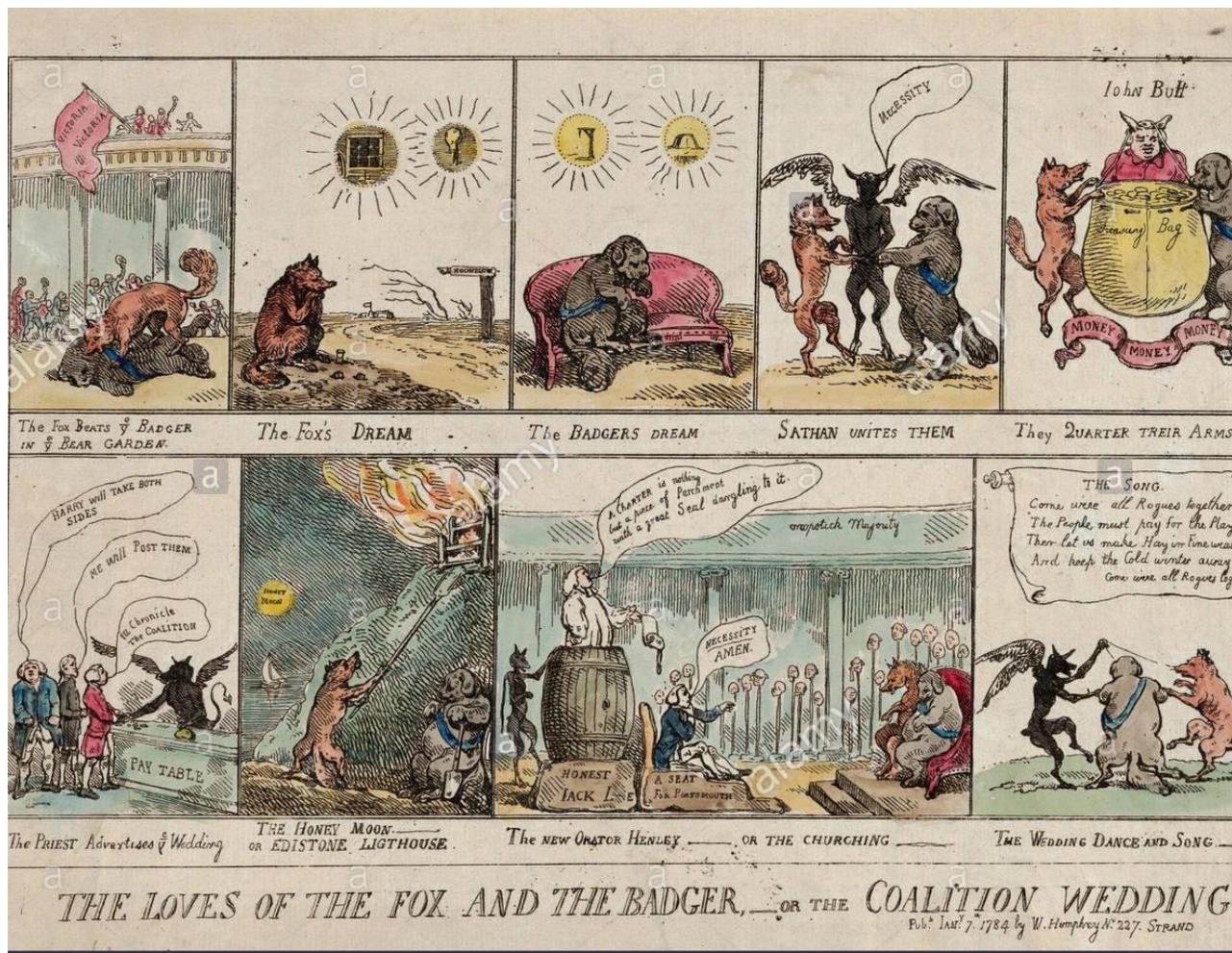


Fig. 2. Brocas, Henry. "The Loves of the Fox and the Badger." *Exshaw's Magazine* (Dublin, Ireland), 1784. Princeton University Digital Library, <http://pucl.princeton.edu/objects/cr56n357x>.



Fig. 3. Doyle, Richard. "Union is Strength." *Punch*, October 17, 1846.

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Fig. 4. Watts, George Frederic. *The Irish Famine*. Oil on canvas. 1850.

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Fig. 5. Gillespie, Rowan. *The Famine Memorial*. Dublin, 1997.

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