

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

Ann Neelon

ONCE, WHEN MY grandmother had just begun to give her dogs a rest, as she would say, after officiating for hours over the family Christmas festivities, my cousin Mary Ann and I announced our intentions to enter the convent. My grandmother slumped over the dining room table. No granddaughters of hers, she insisted, were ever going to become nuns. Over her dead body! Our hearts were set, we said—there was no help for it. We were going to take the veil when we grew up. My grandmother was reduced to tears. She was so dead-tired that she was already in her cups after one highball. Attempts on the parts of her grown children to convince her that first graders were not generally reliable witnesses to their futures hit a bit of a boondoggle.

Why was there so little love lost between my grandmother and the nuns?

On my grandmother's Confirmation Day, one of the poorest girls in the class had checked into the church vestibule appareled in a hand-me-down short-sleeved white dress instead of in the requisite long-sleeved one. The nuns had reciprocated by wrapping the girl's arms in dirty rags from the janitor's closet. The girl had sobbed throughout the ceremony. My grandmother told this story over and over, until she died. The chill of it infused my childhood. It taught me all I needed to know about the ignominy of poverty.

I think my grandmother sensed that the touchstone for her Irish-famine-survivor ancestors is what Irish-born psychiatrist Garrett O'Connor has labeled "malignant shame." Even those families who immigrated to America and survived two generations could not get away from the famine's collective trauma. Nor could the Church. "Like the child of an abused parent," O'Connor has written, "the 19th-century Irish Catholic Church may have internalised a core identity of malignant shame as a response to generations of persecution by the British Government under the Penal Laws."

It is perhaps common practice to put famines in the category of "acts of God," akin to earthquakes and tsunamis, but "acts of God" generally do not cause famines (although they do often precipitate them). Severe droughts and floods happen with cyclic regularity, stressing agricultural production and putting the food supply at risk. Most of these critical situations do not morph into famines. Government response is very often the determinant of whether a bad situation gets much, much worse. It is no accident that nine of the ten worst famines of the twentieth century occurred in Communist countries hell-bent on dismantling the existing agricultural infrastructure to promote collectivization (four of these famines

occurred in China, three in the former Soviet Union, one in North Korea, one in Cambodia, and one in non-Communist India).

The famine in Ireland between 1845 and 1852—the one characterized as “The Great Hunger” and the one whose psychological legacy in the twentieth century Patrick Kavanagh addressed in his famous poem of that title—is a case in point. The blight, which was caused by the fungus *Phytophthora infestans*, did qualify as an “act of God.” However, it was not the blight but *the failures in response to the blight* that elevated an ecological disaster to a human catastrophe of epic proportions. It is safe to assume that at least one million Irish died of famine (and attendant causes), and at least one million emigrated (and emigration has been endemic ever since). According to some estimates, one out of every three Irish people disappeared, as did, for all practical purposes, the Irish language, which was only spoken by the poorest of the poor in the west and southwest.

In the summer of 1845, Irish peasants must have felt a shock akin to what any descendants would experience over a century later in watching their first horror movie with computer-generated special effects. White spots on the leaves of potato plants turned overnight into brown suppurating wounds, stalks withered and blackened, unblemished skin became pitted and pockmarked, and prepossessing spuds that could serve today as the fodder for Irish jokes—*Question: What is a seven-course Irish meal? Answer: A six-pack and a potato*—shrank into stunted shadows of themselves. In addition, an aggressively fetid smell stole over the fields.

The Enlightenment had come and gone in the rest of Europe, and here were the Irish still living as virtual serfs. They were mostly tenant farmers, who owed most of their crops to their (largely absentee) British landlords. To make agricultural matters worse, their plots were exceedingly small, because they had been divided and subdivided to accommodate succeeding generations. The most farmers could hope to do was feed their families out of the fields they tilled on top of paying back the landlord. Despite susceptibility to blight, potatoes produced the highest yield. Hence potatoes were the crop the tenant farmers planted.

The ironies of the potato famine are particularly cruel ones. There *was* enough food in Ireland to feed the starving, but most of it was being exported to England. There *were* relief schemes, but they required starving men to dig roads to nowhere and die en route. There *were* workhouses to billet those who had been evicted from their lands, but their extreme overcrowding promoted the spread of typhus and

Ann Neelon

cholera. There *were* soup kitchens, but they were not instituted until after thousands had died of starvation, and they were dismantled long before the need was met. There *was*, at long last, American maize available for distribution to the poor, but it was so crude that it had to be ground twice into cornmeal, and there weren't enough mills available to grind it. After being ground, it still proved tough to cook, and, once cooked, indigestible. Besides, it had almost no food value, and those who ate it died in droves anyway, some from scurvy because, unlike the potato, it provided no vitamin C. There *was* a repeal of the protectionist Corn Laws, and it did bring down the price of corn, but cheap corn might as well be expensive corn in a country with a potato-bartering economy, where tenant farmers had no money at all.

What kept the British from implementing viable solutions to the crisis of hunger in Ireland? Charles Edward Trevelyan, the very administrator charged with running the relief bureaucracy, did not believe the British government should suspend its *laissez-faire* economic policies to feed the poor. As John Kelly puts it in *The Graves Are Walking: The Great Famine and the Saga of the Irish People*, "...Whitehall and Westminster were eager to modernize the Irish agricultural economy, which was widely viewed as the principal source of Ireland's poverty and chronic violence, and to improve the Irish character, which exhibited an alarming 'dependence on government' and was utterly lacking in the virtues of the new industrial age, such as self-discipline and initiative."

We have decided to focus this issue of *New Madrid* on the Irish famine because indications are that another "great hunger" is threatening the poor in the United States today. The gulf between the rich and the poor is already prodigious, as it was in Ireland in 1847, and it is growing fast. The opulent estates of English lords could be said to prefigure the "McMansions" in our subdivisions, while the dispossessed Irish shivering in their scalpeens anticipate the homeless turning blue on our sidewalks in their cardboard boxes. The Irish rooting through the stubble of harvested fields for stray turnips bring to mind the hungry in our own midst foraging through public garbage.

Statistics from the U.S. Department of Agriculture testify to the severity of the crisis. In 2012, 14.5 percent of the U.S. population (17.6 million households) qualified as food insecure, and forty-nine million Americans lived in food-insecure households. In U.S. households with children under age eighteen, 80 percent were food secure. In 10 percent, only adults were food insecure. In the other 10 percent, both adults and children were food insecure. Furthermore, in seven million households—those characterized as having *very low* food security—

people were actually going hungry on a periodic basis. The number of children living in such households was 977,000, and they represented 1.3 percent of U.S. children.

Unemployment, underemployment, and stagnant wages have condemned millions of Americans to untenable financial situations, at least in the short term. In a country where, according to PolitiFact, four hundred individuals possess more wealth than half of the entire American population, it should come as no surprise that even the middle class is struggling mightily. We will surely have enough trouble keeping Social Security afloat, let alone expanding SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) benefits or increasing the minimum wage to a level where the working poor can buy food in addition to paying rent. In light of our financial distress, it would be foolish for any of us, at least any of us who are not in the “one percent,” *not* to have compunctions about extending the safety net. Still, a government “of the people, by the people and for the people” should draw the line at allowing its citizens to go hungry. The stability of our democracy absolutely depends on our not condemning millions to lives of malignant shame.

It never fails. Whenever my Irish Catholic relatives stand by a groaning holiday table, one of them laughs and says, “our fortune is in our stomachs.” That is our way of telling our famine ancestors to rest in peace. We *do* appreciate what we have. A fortune in diamonds or gold would be superfluous. We have each other, and what more could we ask for? No one will starve to death on our watch.

Without Lawrence Welsh’s great hunger for truths about the Irish experience and his diligence in seeking out contributors, this issue would be a far cry from what it is. Thanks to him and to Eamonn Wall, Renny Golden and John Menaghan, whose insights on “Writing the Great Hunger” got this issue started. I owe a debt of thanks, too, to Claire Tynan of The Great Hunger Museum at Quinnipiac University for working with us to incorporate authentic images of the Great Famine.

We are thrilled to welcome Riley Hanick aboard as our new nonfiction editor. Thanks also to Dale Ray Phillips and to Nita King for their contributions. It was a pleasure, as well, to work with our talented and dedicated MFA interns: Mittie Allen, Rebecca Dundon, Ford Ebling, Brandi Stout, Mechele Williams and Andrea Leigh Youngman.

This issue marks our transition to a new printing arrangement. Special thanks to our Managing Editor, Jacque Day, and to Kristy Snyder of Sheridan Press for hanging on for the wild ride!