

The Famine and *The Illustrated London News* - illustrations as evidence

Summary of Margaret Crawford, 'The Great Irish Famine 1845-9: Image versus Reality', in *Ireland. Art into History*, edited by Raymond Gillespie & Brian Kennedy, Town House, Dublin 1994, pp 75-88

How far do the pictures published in *The Illustrated London News* in the 1840s provide us with an accurate contemporary record of the Famine crisis?

It goes without saying that they were not intended to be a statistical record of the events, but did they succeed in capturing the atmosphere of despair and hopelessness?

The value of the illustrations from this perspective varies considerably.

Those pictures emphasising scenic beauty, such as *The Mall and Mall House*, *Youghal, a scene of the Late Food Riots* (1) ignore the suffering endured during the crisis, as does *The Cork Society of Friend's Soup House* (2).

By contrast, other illustrations which can be matched to written evidence do evince the air of desolation that enveloped the country. Many of the sketches were done 'on location', a point very carefully noted by the paper, and the personal experience that the artists had of the suffering population gave a realism to many of their sketches. In one issue of the paper, the artist assured the readership that 'the objects of which I send you Sketches are not sought after I do not go out of my way to find them'. The conditions under which one drawing of the starving man, Mullins, breathing his last was done, left such a deep impression that the artist described the event in detail (10).

The power of image is most strongly illustrated in three sketches, the *Woman Begging in Clonakilty* (3), *Boy and Girl at Cahera* (4), and *Bridget O'Donnell and her Children* (6). The human suffering is given strength through facial expression, ragged clothing and limited detail.

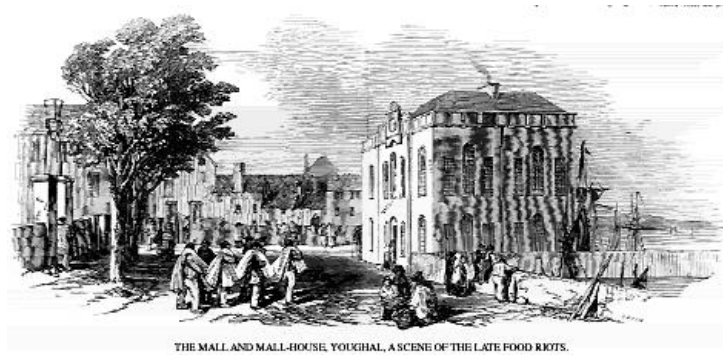
By contrast, in the eviction illustrations the skill, detail and intricacy of the artwork detract from the drama and despair of the episodes, and so require more careful study to reveal all the activity and emotion of the scenes. As Rabb and Brown in *Art and History* point out, 'some pictures have to work hard to convince . . . while others achieve their aims with consummate ease'.

The fact that most of the 'Famine' pictures were accompanied by emotive text conditioned the response of readers to the visual image. Had they appeared in isolation, their impact on the viewer might have been less. Take, for example, the anatomical sturdiness of the individuals portrayed in many of the pictures. But for the accompanying text, the reader might well gain the impression that the Irish crisis was not severe, but merely a temporary problem with food supply, whereas we know from the written documentation that this was not so.

1 *The Mall and Mall House, Youghal, a scene of the Late Food Riots*

The caption refers to 'the late food riots' in Youghal, but the artist chooses here to show a pleasant scene, almost tranquil, with no obvious sign of hunger or distress.

Illustrated London News, ix, 1846



Among the early Famine pictures to appear in *The Illustrated London News* relating to food shortages in Ireland were a pair of pleasing views of Dungarvan, County Waterford, and Youghal, County Cork.... the sketches were done on location, for the paper reported that while sketching, the artist was approached by the local population who left him in no doubt about the hunger and misery currently being suffered:

Annexed is a pair of melancholy sketches of the localities of the late food riots in the south of Ireland - Youghal and Dungarvan; the afflicting details of which have been duly reported in our journal. The Artist has refrained from heightening the picturesqueness of these scenes; but they are stern and striking realities of the sufferings of the people, and must bespeak the sympathy of every well-regulated mind.

Youghal was the grand centre of the late Food Riots and turn-outs for wages. Our Artist was received somewhat roughly whilst he was sketching in the street, because he would not promise the mothers that their children, then working on the part of Government, should have an increase of wages over five or sixpence, which was insufficient to support them with Indian meal at 1s 8d per stone.

The distress, both in Youghal and Dungarvan, is truly appalling in the streets; for without entering the houses, the miserable spectacle of haggard looks, crouching attitudes, sunken eyes, and of hunger and colourless lips and cheeks, unmistakably bespeaks the suffering of the people.

If these illustrations were supposed to conjure an atmosphere of want and distress, they failed. Although the paper described the sketches as 'melancholy', and the artist felt that he had 'refrained from heightening the picturesqueness of these scenes', his sketches did not capture the 'stern and striking realities of the suffering of the people'. Nor did they convey 'the miserable spectacle of haggard looks, crouching attitudes, sunken eyes, and colourless lips and cheeks' that the reporter asserted.

Further pleasant pictures followed. Whether it was felt that there was only a certain level of tolerance among the British readership to doleful illustrations is difficult to gauge, but one comment sheds a glimmer of light on this point. The artist of the series of drawings depicting the miserable conditions in the west of Ireland in 1849 included among his illustrations a pleasing scene of cattle being driven to market, with the comment 'I send you herewith a Sketch of Driving [cattle] for Rent. It may serve to vary a little the miseries I have to portray'.

2 *The Cork Society of Friend's Soup House*

Here is a well-organised Quaker soup kitchen with its servers and their elegantly dressed supervisors: but where are the hungry masses? Can the soup house really have been so peaceful and unhurried, with famine at the door?

Illustrated London News, x, 1847



THE CORK SOCIETY OF FRIENDS' SOUP HOUSE.

Alert to newspaper reports of the increasing seriousness of the food crisis, *The Illustrated London News* carried an article in January of 1847 entitled 'Famine and starvation in the county of Cork'. A large portion of this piece was a reproduction of text from the *Cork Examiner*, and the picture published was of the Cork Society of Friends' soup kitchen.

As the Famine worsened, the pace of private philanthropic activity increased during 1846, and the Society of Friends was at the forefront of this work. Indeed the contribution of the Society of Friends cannot be overstated, both in the tangible aid it provided to the starving and in its major contributions to the historical record of events. These were published in the *Transactions of the Central Relief Committee of the Society of Friends during the Famine in Ireland in 1846 and 1847*. The *Transactions* contain detailed reports of the crisis during the years 1846 and 1847, and provide the historian with a good contemporary source against which to set the illustrations of *The Illustrated London News*.

3 *Woman Begging at Clonakilty*

The artist makes some effort to show distress: the woman's eye seems swollen, her cloak is torn, her baby is a tiny bundle, but she herself is not notably emaciated.

Illustrated London News, x, 1847



WOMAN BEGGING AT CLONAKILTY.

The most harrowing [of these sketches] was of a woman with a small child in her arms begging in Clonakilty. The pained grimace of her countenance and outstretched hand for alms conveyed her need for food.

4 *Boy and Girl at Cahera*

The children gleaning stray potatoes in the empty fields are shown in rags to indicate their misery, with harrowed expressions but they are surprisingly well-muscled given that this is the third year of the Famine.

Illustrated London News, x, 1847



BOY AND GIRL AT CAHERA.

Perhaps the best-known famine illustration is that of the *Boy and Girl at Cahera*. The atmosphere of the picture is of misery and despair as the two children scour a barren field in search of a potato or two that may have evaded blight and escaped the eye of previous scavengers. The expression on the boy's face is pained and his stance is of one starved of both food and heat. His clothes, and those of the girl, are ragged. The girl's hair is spiky and scant, a sign of severe starvation. On the other hand, the limbs of both children appear sturdy, contrary to what one would expect in prolonged famine conditions.

5 *Searching for Potatoes*

But for the haggard faces in the background, this could be an everyday farming scene: the foreground figures show no real evidence of their supposed misery.

Illustrated London News, xv, 1849



SEARCHING FOR POTATOES IN A STUBBLE FIELD.

Two years later, a similar picture by an unnamed artist was published, entitled *Searching for Potatoes*. Once again the figures cannot be described as appearing severely malnourished in anatomical terms. On the contrary, the limbs appear strong and muscular. The one notable symbol of distress is the ragged condition of their clothing. It is the short commentary accompanying the illustration, rather than the picture itself, that provides the more powerful image:

Searching for potatoes is one of the occupations of those who cannot obtain out-door relief. It is gleaning in a potato-field - and how few are left after the potatoes are dug, must be known to everyone who has ever seen the field cleared. What the people were digging and hunting for, like dogs after truffles, I could not imagine till I went into the field [where] I found them patiently turning over the ground in the hope of finding a few potatoes.

6 *Bridget O'Donnell and her Children*

This pathetic group is one of the few in these illustrations showing clear signs of emaciation, and the desperation of the mother's expression is well rendered.

Illustrated London News, xv, 1849



Another illustration depicting famine victims shows Bridget O'Donnell and her Children, and again most of its poignancy comes from the facial expressions and raggedness of the clothing. The limbs of the mother appear particularly sturdy, although the child on the left has thin legs, one of which has texturing that could represent shadow or an open sore, the latter a common feature among the severely malnourished.

Eyewitness accounts confirm instances of extreme suffering. For example, Bridget O'Donnell and her family, subjects of an illustration already referred to, were enduring not only starvation and sickness, but also homelessness. Prior to the food crisis, her husband was a tenant holding a small parcel of land, but late in 1849 the family was evicted for non-payment of rent. Bridget was left without a home. To add to her misfortunes she was ill with fever, as were her children, and she was expecting another child. The child was born dead, and her thirteen-year-old son died of hunger. Even some hardened administrators were sometimes shocked by the scenes they saw. Captain Arthur Kennedy, a Poor Law inspector, recounted years later how he felt at the time:

I can tell you . . . that there were days in that western county [Clare] when I came back from some scene of eviction so maddened by the sights of hunger and misery I had seen in the day's work that I felt disposed to take the gun from behind my door and shoot the first landlord I met.

7 *Ejection of Irish Tenantry*

A grimly effective rendering of an eviction: the brutal bailiff, the pleading tenant, his weeping wife and children, the unfeeling onlookers and the stony-faced soldiers standing by are all convincingly presented.

Illustrated London News, xiii, 1848



Many of the starving found themselves not only without food, but also without habitation. In the pre-Christmas edition of 1848, *The Illustrated London News* published a scathing article condemning those Irish landlords who were using the current crisis to unpeuple their property. The two illustrations that accompanied the text were engraved either by Landells or by one of his assistants. The first depicted an ejection scene, and is one of the most exquisite engravings of the entire Famine collection. The picture contains considerable action. We see the tenant remonstrating with the bailiff seated aloft a black steed. Meanwhile, the bailiff's men are already denuding the roof of thatch, and driving away the tenant's donkey. Looking on are uniformed officers. Their presence was intended to ensure that the bailiff was not impeded in his duties, and to discourage civil disturbance. A second illustration shows the makeshift shelter along the ditch, into which the evicted tenant retreated. The stance of the major figure in the picture is one of utter despair.

The apparent callousness of landlords stemmed from two major problems. On the one hand they suffered a drastic reduction in their incomes as tenants defaulted on rent. On the other hand they were faced with rising taxation. Circumstances varied from district to district. Nevertheless, some landlords were particularly ruthless, justifying their action by the slogan 'evict . . . debtors or be dispossessed'.

8 *The Village of Tully*

This powerful and well-drawn scene shows the outcome of the policy of eviction and clearance of unwanted tenants: a ghost village, whose inhabitants are surplus to economic requirements.

Illustrated London News, xv, 1849



The pace of evictions increased during the late 1840s. Reliable figures are unavailable before 1849, but in that year the constabulary recorded the eviction of 16,686 families representing over ninety thousand people. In 1850 numbers increased to almost twenty thousand families and over one hundred thousand people.

The landscape that was left after systematic clearances of small villages was one of utter desolation. The unroofed cabins presented a picture of emptiness and destruction, which made a strong impact on *The Illustrated London News* reporter who remarked that, 'no conqueror ever left more conspicuous marks of his devastation'. Yet these settlements were not entirely empty. As the reporter continued:

the sketch is not of a deserted village - - though that was a miserable enough spectacle, for the wretched beings who once viewed it as the abode of plenty and peace still linger and hover about it ... The ruthless spoiler has been at work and swept away the shelter that honest industry had prepared for suffering and toiling humanity. A conqueror would not have had time or security to do the mischief which is perpetrated in safety under guardianship of the laws... Within the Union of Kilrush in ... 1849... about 16,000 persons have been unhoused out of 82,358.

Where did these homeless people go? To the workhouse possibly, although as a last resort, many taking that road only when near the point of death. Others found very rudimentary shelter in hedges and ditches by digging out pits.

9 *Funeral at Skibbereen*

The body of a young man is laid on a cart; a second man whips the horse into action; a third stands by with a spade; onlookers gossip and argue: this well-observed scene shows us death stripped of all dignity.

Illustrated London News, x, 1847



The spectre of death was brought very forcefully to the attention of the readership ... both by the written text and the illustrations [of] the realities of the horrifying deaths common in every community. Details of the scale and conditions of interment of corpses, described ... in a January edition of 1847, would seem almost a preparation for an illustration in a later issue: 'In the parish of Kilmore [Skibbereen], fourteen died on Sunday; three of these were buried in coffins, eleven were buried without other covering than the rags they wore when alive.'

A few weeks later the paper carried a heading, 'Mortality in Skibbereen' [giving] graphic details of disease and high mortality. The illustration, with its caption 'Funeral at Skibbereen', was intended to shock Victorian England. The focus of attention was the cadaver of a young man being transported to his grave coffinless. Other, more conventional, funeral scenes also appeared. While many died in the workhouse, many more died along the roadsides and in ditches... more people died from disease than from starvation [but] in some districts deaths from starvation were high. The reporter for the paper noted that:

all sympathy between the living and the dead seems completely out of the question; ... I certainly saw from 150 to 180 funerals of victims to the want of food, the whole number attended by not more than 50 persons; and so hardened are the men regularly employed in the removal of the dead from the workhouse, that I saw one of them with four coffins in a car, driving to the churchyard, sitting upon one of the said coffins, and smoking with much apparent enjoyment.

10 *The local vicar visiting the dying Mullins in his hut, Scull*

Mullins was dying of fever; his children were huddled around embers of the turf fire; the vicar himself also died of fever shortly afterwards.

Illustrated London News, x, 1847



The Illustrated London News captured the details:

A specimen of the in-door horrors of Scull may be seen in [a] ... sketch... of a poor man named Mullins, who lay dying in a corner upon a heap of straw,... whilst his three wretched children crouched over a few embers of turf, as if to raise the last remaining sparks of life. This poor man ... buried his wife some five days previously, and was in all probability on the eve of joining her, when he was found out by the untiring efforts of the Vicar, who, for a few short days saved him from that which no kindness could ultimately avert.... the dimensions of the hut do not exceed ten feet square ... [I] was compelled to stand up to [my] ankles in the dirt and filth on the floor.

I have ... been lengthy in my details in order that you may be as well informed upon the subject as I can enable you to be; and, bearing in mind the horrifying scenes that I have just witnessed, I entreat you to do the best you can for so much suffering humanity; as this visit to the West will, I trust, assist in making this affliction known to the charitable public.