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## When the Famine made Dublin's streets a 'gigantic refugee camp'



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Destitution: The Famine Memorial on Custom House Quay, Dublin. Photo by Yulia Plekhanova

Emily Mark-FitzGerald, Ciarán McCabe and Ciarán Reilly

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What comes to mind when we think of the Great Irish Famine of the 1840s? Potato blight, evictions, starvation, deaths on the roadside and emigration. These are perhaps more readily associated with Ireland's rural areas. But what of the Famine's impact on Dublin?

Without question, the Famine in the capital was not as devastating as what was experienced in other parts of the island. However, many institutions and agencies, of both private relief and public administration, directed their activity from the capital. As impoverished people crowded into the city seeking work or relief, Dublin's streets appeared, in the words of historian Maurice Craig, like "a gigantic refugee camp" — and the conditions of Dublin's slum districts were as horrific as elsewhere in Ireland.

Dublin's population increased from 232,726 in 1841 to 246,679 in 1851. This growth was a consequence of poor migrants flocking to the city, not a reflection of increasing prosperity. The number of Dubliners born elsewhere in Ireland rose by three-fifths over the decade.

committals began rising steeply in 1847, to an all-time high of 9,034 in 1850.

Records reveal an increase in petty crime and theft, as more people began to steal to survive: the failure of the potato had pushed up all food prices, increasing hunger in the city as well. The 1847 Vagrancy Act, motivated by government fears over rising numbers of the destitute and homeless, essentially criminalised poverty. This meant large numbers of paupers entered the prison system — sometimes willingly or intentionally, to get food and shelter — and the jail quickly became overcrowded, with a spike in prisoner deaths as consequence.

Statistics for the Famine decade indicate that suicide accounted for less than 1pc of deaths, but it was certainly under-reported. For historians, suicide has proved one of the most difficult forms of Famine crises to study, given the lack of direct records and textured accounts. In our new book, *Dublin and the Great Famine*, we seek to counterbalance this gap with a close study of one middle-class individual, Patrick Bardin. The inquest into his suicide reveals a man deeply traumatised by his duty as a member of the relief committee of St Nicholas Without, a Church of Ireland parish near St Patrick's Cathedral, and his encounters with the starving on Dublin's streets. Such stories reveal the devastating psychological impact on those who witnessed the Famine, as well as those directly affected.

Philanthropic individuals, religious groups like the Quakers and more than 100 voluntary charitable societies were well-placed to help the Famine poor, especially when access to the city's workhouses was not possible or sought. There were also additions to the city's welfare landscape during the Famine: seven conferences of the newly formed Society of St Vincent de Paul commenced operations in the city between 1845 and 1850, while Church of Ireland clergymen established the Dublin Parochial Association to distribute relief to "deserving" persons of all denominations.

Meanwhile, the wealthier classes still found their luxury goods to be in relative good supply. The diaries of Elizabeth Smith of Baltyboys, Co Wicklow, and John Plunket Joly, of King's County (Offaly), reveal goods and commodities remained open to persons of means throughout the Great Famine, with many of these being foreign imports, including food. Isaac English of Bachelor's Walk advertised the sale of figs, almonds, currants and oranges, while perfume and eau de cologne were sold in George Kertland's shop on Lower Sackville Street. Visitors to the city could choose from any number of first-rate hotels and restaurants, with some establishments opening for the first time during the Famine.

This aspect of the Famine period in Dublin — that at a time of unparalleled scarcity, the demand for luxury goods in Dublin remained strong — may be startling to some, but reveals the fact that for many people in urban centres, the impact of the Famine may have been relatively minimal. Echoes of this disparity can be gleaned from the earliest photographs of Dublin, which date from the mid-1840s. Figures of the poor can be seen only as shadows at the margins of images otherwise centred on Dublin's architectural splendours.

Our new book of research on Dublin and the Famine, by contrast, is our attempt to bring the whole spectrum of Famine experience back into public view and sharper focus.



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