

Writing Dublin's Famine story into Ireland's history books

Books, films and plays have so far generally dealt with rural Ireland's experience of the Irish Famine: Dublin and the Great Famine focuses on the effect the catastrophe had on the country's capital

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The Famine Memorial at Customs House Quay on the banks of the Liffey in Dublin. Picture: Getty

The Irish Famine occupies an important part of our cultural memory and has been vastly explored across the Irish arts. Books like Joseph O'Connor's *Star of the Sea* turned the subject into bestselling material, while it has been the backdrop to several recent Irish films, most recently in Tomás Ó Súilleabháin's *Arracht* and Sebastián Lelio's *The Wonder*, based on Emma O'Donoghue's 2016 novel, currently on general release. In the theatre, meanwhile, the Famine has served both as a literal and metaphorical setting.

In the introduction to the published version of his 1968 play *Famine*, Tom Murphy drew an explicit connection between the physical starvation endured during "the great hunger" and the spiritual legacies for Irish culture. He wrote of "the other poverties that attend famine" adding that "a hungry and demoralised people becomes silent". He wrote that people emigrate in "large numbers" and leave spaces that cannot be filled.

“The dream of food can become a reality,” Murphy says in the conclusion of his author’s note, asking a vital question that sings across the century that divided his play from the historical events: “What can similarly restore mentalities that have become distorted, spirits that have become mean and broken?”

Despite different approaches to representing the Famine in Irish culture, what unites the popular narrative is the focus on rural life, where the potato blight decimated farming communities, for whom the crop was both their primary sustenance and their economic bread and butter.

When we call to mind the almost one million people who died from starvation, then, we think of the three siblings in Martina Conlon McKenna’s seminal children’s book *Under the Hawthorn Tree*, taking shelter under a whin bush on the lonely roads of west Cork, or the uncanny bronze skeletons clinging to the coffin ship rigging of John Behan’s National Famine Memorial in Clew Bay. What we rarely think of is Dublin.

Dublin and the Great Famine, a new book from UCD Press, focuses on this historical lacuna. Edited by Emily Mark-FitzGerald, Ciarán McCabe and Ciarán Reilly, it is a welcome intervention, offering compelling evidence about how daily life in the colonial garrison town was affected by the social and economic catastrophe.

The book was launched in Kilmainham Gaol last week, and in his essay Brian Crowley, curator of collections at Kilmainham Gaol Museum, makes a compelling argument for how the prison’s history reflected the changes in Dublin’s demographic between 1845 and 1851, as the city swelled with refugees from rural Ireland, seeking sustenance and relief.

In a six-year period, the city grew by almost 15,000 people. As desperate, impoverished families arrived in the capital, the prison population grew too: 43 per cent of those incarcerated during the famine years were underage children and women.

What the book is strongest on, however, is how life for those not directly affected by starvation proceeded; in some – shocking – cases almost as normal. Potatoes may have been in short supply, but luxury goods were readily available to those who could afford them.

Kathryn Milligan’s essay focuses on how the art market thrived. It is, however, the micro-historical approach offered in Georgina Laragy’s section on suicide during the Famine which has the potential to move the reader beyond academic and historical interest. Laragy charts the story of Patrick Barden, who was so traumatised by his experiences providing relief to the poor during the worst years of the famine that he took his own life.

There may be, as yet, no plays or music or films or major novels about this aspect of Famine life, but with research like this now available, it seems only a matter of time before Dublin's Famine story becomes more widely acknowledged, adding a richer complexity to the history we already know so well.