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Similarity and Difference: the Appearance of Suffering at the Strokestown Famine Museum

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Representation Matters

(Re)Articulating Collective Identities in a Postcolonial World

Editors Anette Hoffmann
Esther Peeren



THAMYRIS **INTERSECTING** PLACE, SEX AND RACE

N° 20 [2010]

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Introduction

The Great Hunger, or famine, in Ireland began in 1845 and continued to wreak a devastating effect on the land's population through the 1850s. As the single most significant event for the demographic alteration of Ireland in modern history, it is a peculiarly quiet and understated presence in the representational practices of Irish museums and art. There are, however, small cottages devoted to recounting local histories of the famine throughout Ireland, in counties as far apart as Kerry and Donegal. In such examples, one of the recurring methods of representation is to show the famine through the display of various domestic and farming objects with labels providing a famine-centered historical context. As there is no evidence of direct photographic images of the famine era in Ireland, these objects become the primary means by which representations, though scarce, are created in Irish material culture. In a postcolonial reading, these representations of the famine are logically imbued with questions of identity. Namely, the presentation of artifacts and information in museum settings explores the famine as a historical event by encouraging the visitor or reader to recognize and interpret notions of social similarity and difference.

The primary museum devoted to the famine in Ireland is the Strokestown Famine Museum, situated in Co. Roscommon in the midlands of the country. Throughout this museum, representations of famine occur on two distinct levels: firstly, accounts of both the victims of suffering and the contributors to that suffering are presented; and secondly, the displays overtly correlate the past to the present day. The site of the museum provides the first indication of the representations to follow, and the first exhibition room tells a particular local history that is presented as an utterance of both a broader national history and what is perceived as a trans-national, trans-temporal

condition of modern famine more generally. Strategies of recognizing similarity and difference, seeing “sameness” and “otherness,” are apparent throughout the museum. Displays and artifacts are presented in carefully constructed conversations with each other, and as the reader moves through the museum the sequence of revelation central to the exhibition forces the staging of various identities and (their) alterities, in order to understand the famine as it is re-membered at this location.

Indication – Situating the Museum

The Strokestown Famine Museum tells the story of one estate decimated during the famine of the 1840s. In this case, a landlord-driven policy of emigration resulted in the depletion of an agri-dependent population. The assassination of the landlord in question was followed by the trial and hanging of the supposed assassin. The museum, first opened to the public in 1994, lays a claim to authenticity by locating its primary voice within the fabric of the buildings and grounds: the museum displays are contained in the former stables, the Big House is open for guided tours, and visitors can also stroll through the sprawling parkland and walled gardens. This luscious context provides a marked contrast to the tale of deprivation told in the museum’s exhibits and information panels. Strokestown Park was formerly the estate of the Mahons, a family of local wealth and power whose story, as it is now told, casts them as a stereotype of the landed gentry of colonized nineteenth-century Ireland.¹

The site exudes a sense of the worthy wealth contingent on Anglo sympathies of a former era. Located in the center of the town it spawned, the estate opens with a sweeping driveway. A grey stone wall to its left masks the stables and courtyard and, further on, the walled gardens. The house is an eighteenth-century three-storey mansion of grey stone with a pillared portico and a standard classical system of diminutive scale windows per storey. The façade is symmetrically balanced: both sides are adorned by white servants’ blocks connected to the owner’s residence by Palladian-style curved wings. The single-storey whitewashed stable building contains the museum and a paved path leads through the loose gravel to its entrance.

Beyond the casual atmosphere of the pay booth, a dark green door announces the beginning of the museum proper through the medium of an A4 laminated printout of heraldic iconography (Figure 1). This bears the simplified form of a green seven-pillared temple plotted on a lighter green marbled background below some text in red, bold, capital Times print that reads: “Famine Museum Entrance.” Though the production value of the sign is informal, the choice of iconography is cause for thought. It calls to mind the austerity of a shrine, strongly echoing the historical relationship between the museum and the temple. As Susan Pearce writes, in general terms: “Museums are the modernist heirs to the European tradition in the long term which has created an organically related sequence of holy repositories . . . in which collected material of abiding community significance can be stored and (usually) displayed” (387).²

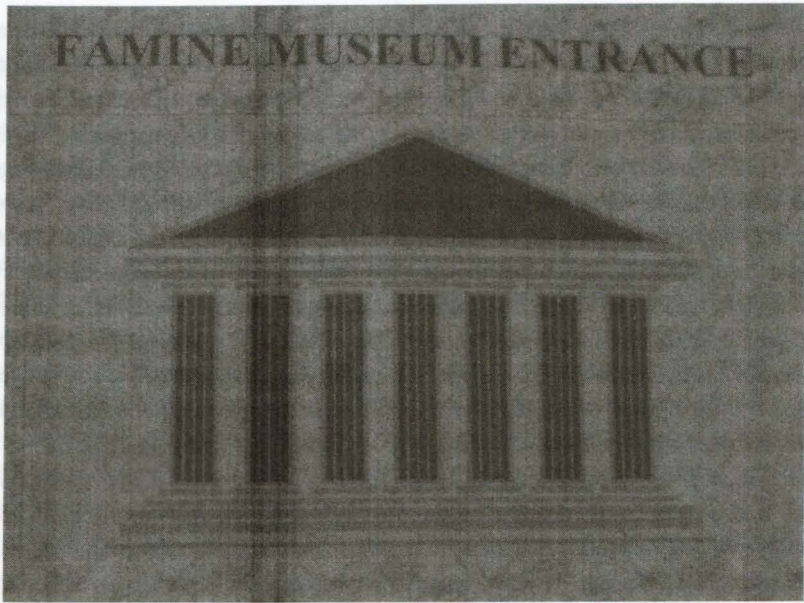


Figure 1 Museum Sign (Niamh Ann Kelly, 2004).

The sign is clearly intended to portion off whatever lies on the other side of the green door from all that constituted the journey up to it. What I am about to enter is a sanctuary of some kind; what I have passed through to get here is of a different order. Duncan and Wallach write of the significance of both the spatial and architectural structures of museum and gallery spaces (448–69). They explore the interrelationship between such visual and material cues and the construction of citizenship through the “scripting” of exhibitions.³ The signage up to the entrance of the Famine Museum, the context of the site itself, and the situating of the museum in the stables, clearly iterate an awareness of such a scripting, though the nature of the “citizenship” is only finally revealed in the exhibits beyond the Museum Entrance sign.

This marking off of territory is a historical compound of the tradition of museum spaces as “other” than the everyday, while still, in theory, by modern description accessible to all. Historians and cultural analysts alike are aware of this desire for distinction on the one hand and, on the other, the parallels often implied between museums and other public spaces, such as botanical gardens, parks, and zoos. Historically, pleasure gardens and, later, amusement parks replaced the traveling fair, reflecting an emergent element of modern town and city planning that promoted designated spaces to be developed as leisure areas. Similarly, zoos were planned to replace the more transitory form of the circus, in recognition of the fast-growing stationary urban populations of modernity.⁴

Increasingly, such observations tend to equate an urban-centered desire for social distraction with the more aggressive consumer-driven advent of museum marketing. Pearce emphasizes that the emergence of the modern museum coincided with a rise in capitalist concerns with market values and the advent of consumer society in the West (116). Brawne also identifies museums as “not only places of social pilgrimage but also components of the service industry catering for our leisure” (56). Susan Sontag, writing on the difficulty of defining an appropriate space for the display of photographs of suffering, states that the “chief model of public space is the mega-store (which may also be an airport or a museum).” She goes on to describe the museum:

Once a repository for conserving and displaying the fine arts of the past, the museum has become a vast educational institution-cum-emporium, one of whose functions is the exhibition of art. The primary function is entertainment and education in various mixes, and the marketing of experiences, tastes and simulacra. (107–9)

The secluded rural location of the Strokestown Famine Museum, however, indicates that it is unlikely to be merely a space intended for the distraction of the, usually urban, masses. Instead, the location of the museum enters its representations into a postcolonial paradigm in which Ireland’s national identity is tied closely to perceptions and perpetuations of ruralism as integral to Irishness, interwoven with a problematic notion of linear time in the shift from Ireland as a colony to a Free State.

The Utterance of History: Re-Telling Tales

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s exploration of the mechanisms and implications of appropriating alternative history or histories undermines the easy identification of rupture in the supposed transition of a society or culture from colonized to free. With a cautionary tone, she advises that “we are obliged to deal in narratives of history, even believe them,” and further that “neocolonialism is a displaced repetition of many of the old lines laid down by colonialism” (272, 274). Attendant to this is the, for Spivak, necessary counterintuitive tendency to focus on repetitive negotiations within a supposed point of rupture, which therefore negates rupture as finite or even as an appropriate concept in this context. She denies the possibility of decolonization in any essential form and speaks, instead, to a neo-colonial globe in danger of supplementing a postcolonial elite. Those who appropriate alternative histories I suggest we could call “survivors,” as they claim to speak for those previously subjugated or submerged by processes of historical power. Such a survivor may also, according to Spivak, unwittingly or otherwise, rehearse internal patterns of colonization within cultures in the process of re-making history, namely in the telling of that colonial history in a postcolonial context. This questioning of the definition of post-colonialism as a discrete break, or even a meaningful transition from colonialism bears significant relation to the means of representation at work in the Strokestown Famine Museum.

In the first exhibition room, “The Ascendancy,” the tale seems a simple one: a basic account of the land and the succession of its owners that provides a description of the ascendancy in Ireland in general (Figure 2). The introductory panel informs visitors:

Following the Cromwellian Plantation of the 1650s, Catholics owned approximately one-tenth of the land. Thirty years earlier they had owned nearly two-thirds. One of the planters, the “adventurer” Nicholas Mahon (d.1680) was granted approximately six thousand acres at Strokestown for his services under Cromwell . . .

This text is the opening remark of the first set of freestanding panels bearing the headings “The Landed Gentry” and “The Dublin Parliament.” Comprised of a brief text accompanying three illustrative images, these panels give a terse outline of their designated subjects. Clearly devised to make the specific genesis of the Strokestown estate of relevance to the economic context of the history of the famine as a whole, the text panels throughout the museum continue this pattern – leaping from the general to the specific and back again.

The first section of the panels is illustrated, inexplicably, by a reproduction of a watercolor, captioned “The Linen Hall, Dublin, 1783.” The collapse of the cottage linen industry in southern Ireland in the 1820s, unable to compete with the modernization taking place in Britain and the north of Ireland, left a significant proportion of the rural communities of several counties, including Roscommon, suddenly without income or occupation (Gray, “Ideology and the Famine” 23–24). As this is not explained on the panel, the watercolor’s relevance assumes a historical awareness on the part of the reader.

The following two panels devoted to “The Dublin Parliament” are illustrated with a reproduction of a garishly colored *Punch* magazine cartoon entitled “Lady Rock Settling the Half Year Account with the Tithe Prod,” and a black-and-white print “The Irish House of Commons in Session, 1790.” The cartoon image depicts the central figure of a caricature of Ireland as a buxom, ruddy-faced woman complete with traditional red shawl, wielding some sort of prod or whip as she grasps at a man running from her. The man must be a middleman – that is, a man who ran the estates of often absentee landlords – as he has a hat and is wearing riding boots, the likely attire of someone of a middle-income bracket. Behind them is a clergyman, hence the pun on “prod.” The middleman has dropped his riding whip and a piece of paper, probably a tithe agreement, which would outline that one tenth of a laborer’s income was to be paid to the church. The background is a bland rural scene, save for the obvious church spire on the right. The language of this cartoon is standard *Punch* fare – the indigenous Irish typically drawn with stocky build, exaggerated facial grimacing, enacting violent and/or, at times, drunken behavior.

Alongside this cartoon, the interior view of the Irish House of Commons in full session looks distinctly sober, with the sunlight streaming onto the chequered marbled

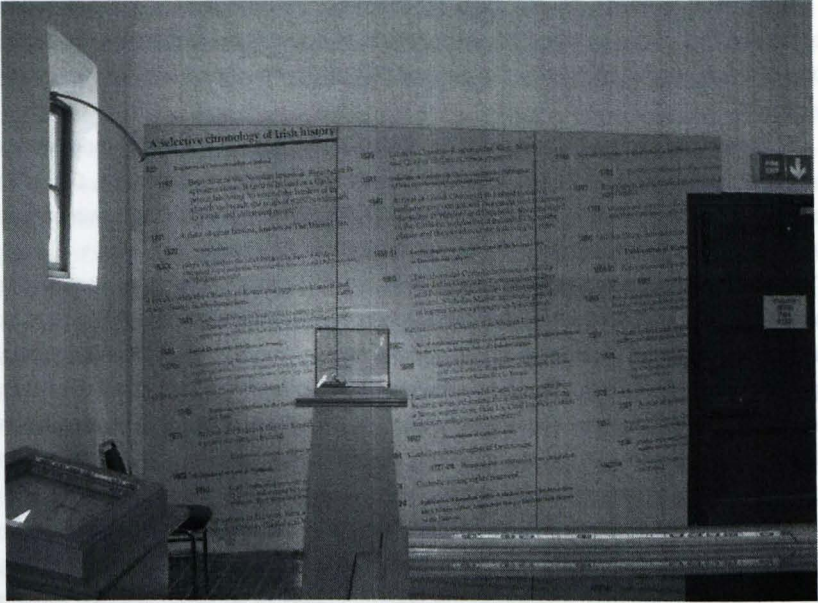


Figure 2 Views of “The Ascendancy”, the first exhibition room (Niamh Ann Kelly, 2004).

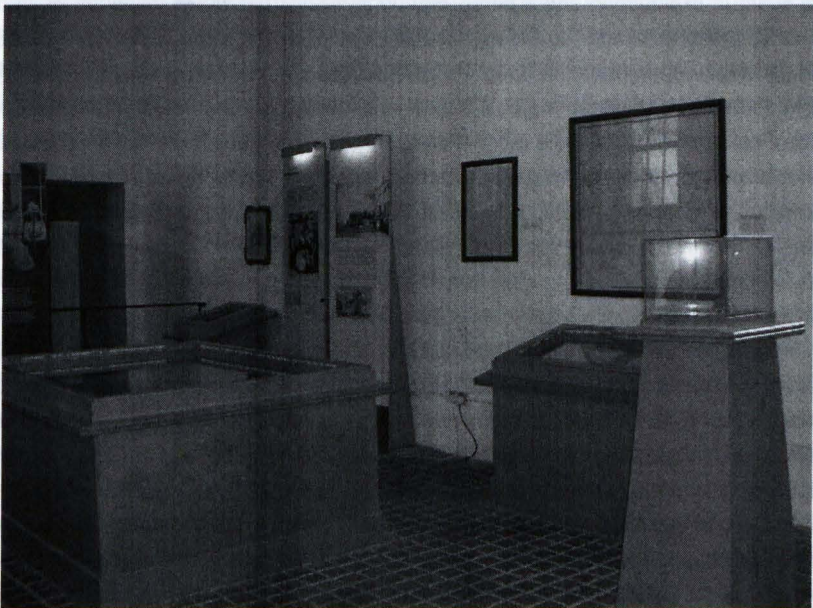


Figure 2 (continued)

floor of James Gandon's grand chambers at College Green Dublin. The all-male members sport the requisite chamber wigs, which, along with their breeches and tapering braided jackets, clearly date the image to the eighteenth century. The upper-floor viewing galleries are full with an orderly crowd of seated onlookers. This image shows a splendid scene of politics at play: the classical symmetry of the interior is offset by the dramatic compositional trigger of a darkly dressed lone figure, presumably agitator for Catholic rights Henry Flood, who has taken the floor, standing with his hand raised in an emphatic gesture.

The presentation of these images suggests a coupling of the historical-political context of Ireland during the famine with the localized tale of Strokestown, comprised of its lists, objects, images, texts, and maps of a particular people and place. This is perhaps a necessary co-joining of two potentially disparate traditions of historiography. It is a delicate balance to attempt to weigh up the local, often personal, stories with a wider, in this case predominantly national, history. In an effort to contextualize her work on the tradition of female representations in famine literature, Margaret Kelleher refers to the alternatives set out by Paul Ricoeur, who wrote of two modes of encountering a (hi-)story: "a ruinous dichotomy between a history that would dissolve the event in explanation and a purely emotional retort that would dispense us from thinking the unthinkable" (qtd. in Kelleher 13). The first dissolution of meaning through explanation would no doubt be attendant to the more universally told history, such as that of a national or global situation, while the second denial of meaning by way of emotional retort would more likely emerge from an encounter with a personal or localized story. In a seeming contradiction, Ricoeur is further quoted by Kelleher as saying: "the more we explain in historical terms, the more indignant we become; the more we are struck by the horror of events, the more we seek to understand them." The complexities inherent to both perpetuating meaning and seeking to understand retrospectively, through a historical account, are most readily the subject of Ricoeur's comments. Kelleher is referring specifically to the individuation of famine through the portrayal of victims in literature as a necessary and sometimes effective strategy to depict horror (6). However, the tactic taken at Strokestown is potentially more illuminating, as it attempts to individuate the famine through the portrayal of perceived contributors to suffering, as well as single sufferers, such as various evictees.

In the first set of panels, the focus is primarily on providing historical context by way of introduction to the local story to come. The first of the three images presented is ostensibly a neutral historical illustration, consisting merely of a visual account of a center of business at a particular time (though its relevance is not indicated as such or otherwise). The second is a highly charged cartoon, which, both literally and metaphorically, colors the text. The third is, on close reading, equally provocative through its deceptively innocuous classicism, which masks the intensity of a fraught political situation. As three images broadly contemporary to famine times by different

illustrators and artists, they present three types of representation common for the period. They are also three types of two-dimensional representations typically deployed in retrospective views of the famine, though all seem concerned with a historical explanation of a national context for the famine. In this reading, these first images utter a prelude to the localized site of famine to be revealed in this room and throughout the museum.

Discussion of these types of historical images – the illustration, the cartoon, and the watercolor/painting – and their social function occurs from different standpoints according to the visual material analyzed in the writings of scholars as diverse as Catherine Marshall, an art historian and curator; Tom Dunne, Helen Litton and Noel Kissane, historians; Margaret Crawford, social historian; and Peter Gray, historian and illustration analyst. Marshall, for example, in her quest to understand the lack of artistic interest in portraying the reality of Irish life during the nineteenth century, surmises: “the problem was not the depiction of poverty . . . but rather the politicisation of that poverty in a colonised country” (49). Similarly, historian Tom Dunne, in “The Dark Side of the Irish Landscape,” reflects that this gap between reality and representation was defined largely by the relationship of art to politics and to the marketplace. This dearth of evidence of artists in Ireland portraying the famine or even the general impoverishment endemic for the whole of the nineteenth century is remarkable on two counts. First, as Campbell draws attention to in his essay on the historical context of the famine, the Poor Law Inquiry of 1832 stated that some three million people were at poverty level, and later that the total population in 1841 was 8,175,124 (15). It is reasonable to assume the poverty level of these decades remained, at best, close to 35% of the population. Second, as Marshall points out, elsewhere in Europe a trend of so-called realism was emerging that depicted and even sanctified the peasant lifestyle (cf. Millet and Breton in France; Watts in Britain), while none such was manifest in Ireland. Logic surmises that had artists looked to the peasant life they would have been confronted with, and perhaps felt obliged to visualize, an unspoken poverty. In indirect response to Marshall’s wondering, Dunne suggests that the Irish context was witness to a Romanticism in art, one which distracted artists with a vision of political idealism and prevented them from seeing or even looking at the peasant reality around them. Duffy offers a more mercenary explanation when writing on topographical art in Ireland in the early nineteenth century and underlines the significance of the social class of most artists and viewers. He distinguishes between viewer and viewed: “Everyday squalor and poverty would have offended most artistic eyes (and noses), and only the most dedicated illustrators faithfully recorded living conditions that were quite alien to their class” (34).

Crawford pursues a different focus on visual material relating to the Irish famine. Interrogating both the commissioning briefs and the final results of the images in *The Illustrated London News*, she emphasizes the significant discrepancy between verbal

accounts, which horrified readers, and images, which broadly beautified scenes of starvation or more usually relief (75–88). Crawford also draws attention to the discrepancy between the severity of written accounts and the comparatively beautiful visual descriptions to be seen in the etchings of illustrators such as James Mahony, as well as the inaccuracy of the “human features of famine” that British readers would have been unfamiliar with. Litton, whose *The Irish Famine* comprises a concise illustrated history of the Irish famine, relies considerably on the images from the *London Illustrated News*, though contains little critical account of them.

A perhaps surprising point of view is outlined by Gray in his exploration of the political implications of the cartoons in *Punch*. He approaches these visuals as historical documents and argues that they are highly pertinent to serious retrospective consideration of the famine as they shaped contemporary perceptions as well as providing satirical commentaries where written account was absent (“*Punch and the Great Famine*” 26–32). Kissane adopts an all-inclusive approach as he presents a history molded from various documents, ranging from government reports and recipe lists to survey maps and drawings. His bringing together of such a variety of visual evidence suggests an equivalence of authority between illustrations and more official documents. Inadvertently, Gray also requests this parity by his declaration of *Punch* cartoons as historical documents. Such a designation is by no means typical for a historian and indicates the re-assessment of visual and material culture as evidently as useful as more traditional modes of historical record such as documents, data, statistics, and surveys.

The re-consideration of what may tell and re-tell the stories of the famine has the potential to address Spivak’s provocative denial of the supposed rupture between colonial and postcolonial situations. It seems that the utterance of the traces of history presents both the possibility to rehearse a colonial pattern and the potential to transcend it. At Strokestown, the research and curatorial engagement is undoubtedly one of deep consideration that struggles between these outcomes, chiefly through two differing conceptual devices: there is the generation of a spectacle of trans-historical representation and simultaneously the promotion of a historical, ultimately local, narrative. Aspects of both broader histories and specific personal accounts are the material of each of these conceptual endeavors. Processes of forged identities and alterities come forcefully into play throughout the museum in the attempt to distinguish between these strategies of representation. The agenda at Strokestown is, it seems, to find a space for representation between Ricoeur’s notions of explanation and horror and, further, to move beyond indignation toward a meaningful exploration of the conditions and outcomes of the famine. From a close reading of the first exhibition room, it becomes apparent that this exploration at Strokestown is also assumed to provide an understanding of the Irish famine that is potentially transferable across temporal and geographical conditions.

Seeing Sameness: Identity

Beyond the three images discussed above, set in a small alcove at a height of approximately five feet, is a cluster of figurines labeled “Rural Irish figures, early 20th century” and protected by a sheet of Perspex (Figure 3). Consisting of five adult figures, including a woman with a baby wrapped in her shawl, and a goat, the group stands a mere ten centimeters high. The figurines are a curiosity. Informative in terms of dress of a time some fifty to sixty years after the famine, they are made of crudely cast ceramic that is brightly colored. Atypically, each of the figures is wearing shoes. The two older-looking women wear red headscarves, the younger woman has a red skirt, and both of the men don red shirts. According to Bourke, the recurrence of red, brown, black, and dark blue clothing was common in rural Ireland (68–70). The figures are clothed almost exclusively in red- and brown-colored garments, with the exception of a blue skirt on one of the older women. Each member of the group appears to have a robust physique despite the widespread poverty in Ireland from the eighteenth up to the early twentieth century. It is commonly noted by nutritionists and historians alike that, though a perilous dependency, the potato-centered diet contributed to one of the healthiest, most nutrition-rich diets in northern Europe, giving the Irish a physical strength and longevity unusual for such poverty. The quasi-heroic stance of the figures and the bareness of their presentation – vulnerably alone in a whitewashed alcove – traps them somewhere between Jack Yeats’s iconic 1957 painting *Men of Destiny* and tourist mementos incidentally placed in a serious museum setting.

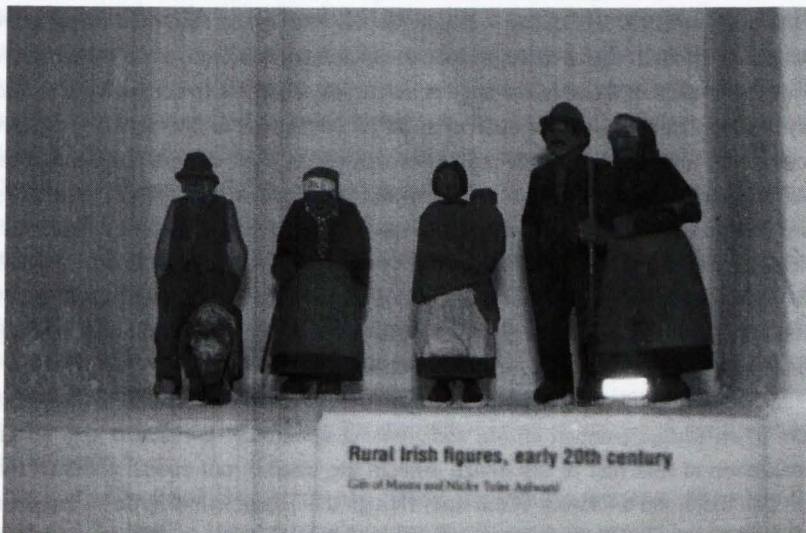


Figure 3 Rural Irish figures, early 20th century (Niamh Ann Kelly, 2004).

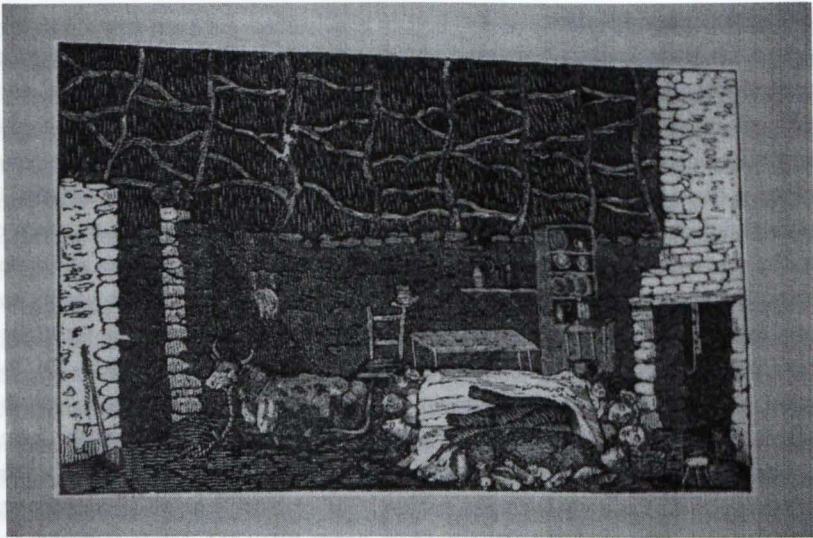


Figure 4 A Cottier Tenant and his Family, 1830s (Niamh Ann Kelly, 2004).

Nearby, on the wall, is a framed and mounted copy of a black-and-white drawing entitled “A Cottier Tenant and his Family, 1830s” (Figure 4). The image depicts a family lying huddled beneath a blanket in front of an open hearth with a bullock tethered behind them sharing the heat. As is well accounted in various histories, the livestock would sleep at night on the hearth alongside the family, so as to make best use of the dying embers. This cottier – a farm laborer who rented land from the landlord each year – owns a chair, a table, a stool, and a dresser filled with crockery. While the rendering of each of these furnishings is individually accurate to common contemporary description, it would have been unusual for one cottier to own so many possessions. Even towards the end of the nineteenth century the ownership of a dresser was the exception rather than the norm and this amount of crockery less likely. Furthermore, were a cottier the proud owner of a full dresser, he would likely have another room for the livestock. Add to this Foster’s summary of the census of 1841, which demonstrates that 40% of the Irish population lived in one-room huts and 37% lived in two- to four-room huts (334), and the discrepancies between this image and an average cottier’s domestic interior are obvious.

The drawing is by Wexford landlord James Connery. His view seems to have been from a low seated position on the floor, looking upwards. The result of this unique focalization is that half of the image depicts the interior roof space, a thatch that rests on the crude brickwork of the wall. Though this image is indicated as representative of one particular reasonably well-off cottier tenant, its placement in the first room of the museum is no doubt intended to describe nineteenth-century Irish



Figure 5 Eritrea, April 1991 (Niamh Ann Kelly, 2004).

poverty in general. In the interests of depicting the signs of rural life in Ireland, the choice to display this drawing here seems to compromise the more likely absence of possessions in favor of positive signifiers of rural poverty.

Hanging alongside Connery's drawing, again framed and mounted, is a color photograph, "Eritrea, April 1991" (Figure 5). On the floor of what appears to be a mud hut, three children lie beneath an old blanket on a makeshift mattress for a bed. In the background is a bullock and, resting against ochre mud walls that have been part whitewashed, are various basic farm implements, such as a hoe and a spade. The photograph has been taken looking downwards, from a standing height, with a slight fish-eye view that emphasizes the closeness of these cramped quarters. While "A Cottier Tenant and his Family, 1830s" is a black-and-white drawing, one of the most primary of visual communicative forms, the color photograph of "Eritrea, April 1991" is of the present day, or at least a more recent past. The shared compositional elements of these two images speak to the reader just as loudly as the temporal differences. The message seems clear and is echoed throughout the museum: what happened then, here, is still happening now, elsewhere. Not articulated in the text panels, it is the juxtaposition of these two images that introduces this core agenda of the museum. As noted by Mary Robinson, President of Ireland, in the Preface to the Museum book:

Now, if we look at it thoughtfully and clearly, and with the factual assistance of this book and the Famine Museum, that past has the power to do something more: it can construct and strengthen our understanding and our sympathy in the present. (7)

There is a worthwhile comparison to be made here to a dichotomy raised by Joep Leerssen between Lessing's notions of *Nacheinander* and *Nebeneinander*, or consecutiveness and contiguousness⁵: "artistic representations can concentrate either on the spatial arrangement of objects into a spectacle, or the temporary concatenation of events into a narrative." He further relates this to the telling of history: "one way of unifying history proved to be to rearrange its consecutive events from a narrative order into a spectacle, a conspectus of juxtaposed 'freeze-frame' images" (7). At Strokestown, this two-tiered approach to (re)presentation is manifested in the curatorial choices of display that move from presenting historical narratives to creating spectacles of contemporary relativity.

That the documented historical account of the Mahon estate can be usefully brought to bear on and, in some ways, compared to the photographed present-day famines is reiterated in the exhibits. Indeed, throughout the museum, prints, paintings, and drawings of the Irish famine are juxtaposed with photographs of latter-day African famines. A similar comparison is suggested between furniture, as later in the museum a three-legged Irish stool in one room bears visual relation to an African stool or *gambur*, possibly from Somalia, in the final exhibition room. The alliance created between the past and the present assumes that visually identifying similarity can produce political, social, and economic empathy across colonial and post- or neo-colonial experiences through the recognition and formation of shared identities. The effectiveness of this utterance seems to rest primarily on the ability of the photographic image to enrapture, for, as in "Eritrea, April 1991," the supposed realism of the camera rudely takes the viewer out of the lull of distant facts and generalizations on the past.⁶ This image is quiet, there is no harbinger for it; it appears alongside the historical drawing so as to change how it is seen.

Seeing Otherness: Alterity

The difficulty in visually representing the context of modern famine (invariably poverty) is created by the lack of material evidence it entails. One strategy to counter this curatorial quandary at Strokestown has been to emphasize the material wealth of the landlord class (colonizer) in contrast to the comparatively lesser possessions of the cottier class (colonized). However, it is difficult to make this distinction without actual visual cues, and so images and objects have been appropriated by the museum for this purpose.

Opposite "Eritrea, April 1991" hangs a portrait of Major Denis Mahon (Figure 6). With finely penciled detail, mounted, and gilt-framed, the drawing conveys a stately sense of poise. It is the portrait of a gentleman of property, shown seated in an armchair by his writing desk, indicated by an ink jar and quill. As per the contemporary neo-classical trend, it is a prescription three-quarter-length portrait with the sitter rendered in clear draughtsman's detail against a sketched suggestion of drapes in



Figure 6 Major Mahon (Niamh Ann Kelly, 2004).

the background. At this first encounter, Major Mahon seems slightly apprehensive, leaning uneasily in his chair, hands clasped on his crossed knee, his facial expression stern, if not a little impatient. The label on the wall beside states simply that: “Major Mahon was the cousin and heir of Maurice, Baron Hartland. He inherited the Strokestown estate in 1845 but was assassinated two years later.”

The dark collar of his evening jacket is velvety in texture; his cravat, waistcoat, and jacket are all indicators of his wealth and contrast with the rural figurines on the other side of the room. His cushioned armchair belongs to a world apart from the hut interiors imaged on the wall opposite.

Between “Eritrea, April 1991” and “Major Mahon” is a free-standing panel, “After the Union,” with an enlarged reproduction of an early-twentieth-century photograph of the last members of the Mahon Family (Figure 7). They are posed for a family portrait, the panel recounts, at the back of the house, over the underground tunnel built to keep servants out of view. Fashionably attired, the group is resplendent: the four women wear elaborate hats, the older man a bowtie, the younger a cravat, and the girl-child seated at the front has placed her wide-brimmed hat on the ground. The text begins: “In the late 19th century, the dominance of the Irish landed gentry diminished greatly . . .”



Figure 7 After the Union (Niamh Ann Kelly, 2004).

and concludes: “The child in the foreground is Olive Pakenham Mahon . . . Her death in 1982 brought ascendancy life in County Roscommon to an end.”

In a glass case mounted higher than any other in the room rest “The 2nd Baron Hartland’s Pocket Watch,” its elegant winding key, and a brief printed account of the four Barons preceding the notorious Major Denis Mahon of the 1840s. The pocket watch, inscribed in 1835, is definitively a man’s timepiece, and as such connotes a masculine tradition of governance where, in a country of mass poverty, such a luxury item symbolic of status and wealth was an uncommon possession. In discussing the illustrations for the *Illustrated London News*, Crawford observed: “A precise representation of famine was less important than the overall atmosphere of misery that the engravings were seeking to portray” (82). This comment identifies a common theme for historians and a conundrum for cultural analysts representing the famine. The very lack that predetermined the famine, the impoverishment that sustained it, and the absence it subsequently created, on bodily, material, and geographical levels, is apparently impossible to describe in its own terms. And so it is hardly surprising that in the first room of the Strokestown Famine Museum, the poverty of the early-nineteenth-century rural Irish population is indicated by a drawing of an interior domestic scene of the 1830s and a set of figurines of the early twentieth century, both of which show more material possessions than historians claim was typical. By prescribing a particular visual description of alterity, the museum promotes the visitor’s identification with the colonized.⁷

At Strokestown, the visitor’s recognition and formation of alterities – through their reading of the representations presented in the exhibits – engenders a sympathetic

tone to their comprehension of the visual accounts, which ultimately encourages the appearance of a unified event or narrative. The advocacy of “seeing” poverty is further emphasized through contrast with the relative luxury of the Mahon family, to be viewed here dressed in finery, owning a big house, a plush armchair, and, not least, an elegant pocket watch.

Imaginary Orders: The Difficulty of Documentary⁸

In the center of the room, a glass case positioned at waist height displays a maquette of the sprawling townland of Gortoose/Strokestown (Figure 8). This gives a bird’s eye view of what the visitor just walked through en route to the museum, putting across in miniature language the relationship between the layout of the town as it now stands and the physical extent of the estate that effectively provided its livelihood until famine times. It is near impossible to peer into this case without seeing various exhibits and panels in the room reflected in its protective glass covering. It is therefore impossible to view it without an acute awareness of what Edward Said termed the “invention of geographical space,” as these representations around the room interfere with the visitors’ reading of the miniature landscape in front of them.

Said first articulated the notion of imaginative geography in *Orientalism* (1978) and *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), as a concept firmly rooted in the postcolonial territorial anxieties of an imperial west. He also wrote of the constructed nature of

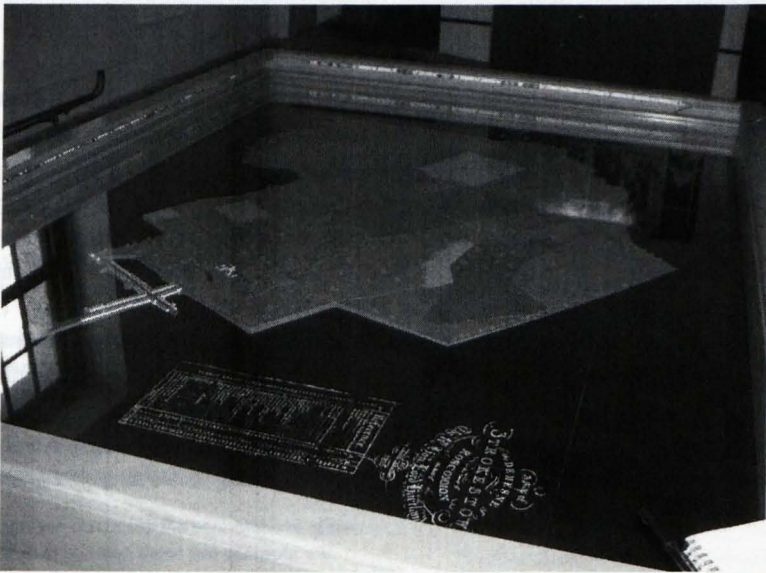


Figure 8 Maquette of Townland of Gortoose/Strokestown
(Niamh Ann Kelly, 2004).

the relationship between a place and various connected traditions, such as the emergence in France of Bastille Day in 1880:

The invention of tradition is a method for using collective memory selectively by manipulating certain bits of the national past, suppressing others, elevating still others in an entirely functional way. Thus memory is not necessarily authentic, but rather useful. ("Invention" 244–5)⁹

With specific reference to Palestine, he usefully articulated that:

... the interplay between geography, memory, and invention, in the sense that invention must occur if there is recollection – is particularly relevant to a twentieth-century instance . . . which instances an extraordinary rich and intense conflict of at least two memories, two sorts of historical invention, two sorts of geographical imagination. ("Invention" 248)

Whilst Said wrote of still bloodily contested territory, a quieter contestation continues in post- and neo-colonial climes, to which Spivak refers in the passage quoted earlier. This negotiation of strategies of re-making history – re-telling the tales, in short, of re-claiming the past – recalls Sontag's recent proclamation on the problematic concept of memory. Sontag negated the notion of collective memory and proposed that there is only "collective instruction" (76–9). Such a statement marries well to Said's suggestion that there cannot be a neutral notion of shared memory, only constructions of identities bound, for multifarious reasons, superficially to particular spaces.

The initial indications at the Strokestown Famine Museum speak, in the first instance, directly to a post- and neo-colonial context such as Spivak evoked: public access to the gardens, parklands, and Big House are, quite literally, the "old lines" of colonial power, marked out territorially and further re-iterated in the maquette of the estate in the first exhibition room. The title of this room, "The Ascendancy," announces the intention to continue indoors the narrative of historical dominance begun en route to the museum, in the voice of its location, by the presentation of objects, text, and visuals as documentary evidence. Within the galleries, the narrative becomes more cluttered as the devices of colonial difference are overtly reversed – albeit intentionally, in the way Homi Bhabha might describe as "a sense of the new as an insurgent act of cultural translation" (7) – to project "otherness" onto the colonizer re-membered. Meanwhile, seeing "sameness" through reading visual similarity engenders the affiliation of momentarily constructed identities across geographical, temporal, and cultural divides. These visually cued translations of objects, images, and histories are together intended to transcend the problem of documenting an event defined by absence, by emphasizing visible tangible signs and, in doing so, to make suffering appear.

Acknowledgments. All images by the author, by kind permission of the Famine Museum Strokestown Park. Thanks to Catherine Marshall, for access to her research files, and to Tom Dunne.

Notes

1. This stereotype is frequently contested by various historiographers, from as early as Maria Edgeworth writing in 1847 (Kelleher 130). By contrast, the writings of Donnelly, which chronicle various evictions countrywide during the famine, are difficult to ignore as evidence of widespread attitudes and actions that mirror those of Major Mahon at Strokestown (“Mass Eviction” 155–173; *Great Irish Potato Famine* 132–168). The differentiation between guilty and blameless landlords is but one aspect of the greater conflict between what are typically perceived as more nationalistic-driven histories and self-consciously revisionist histories, such as the 1994 anthology *The Great Famine: Studies in Irish Histories, 1845–52*, edited by R.D. Edwards and T.D. Williams. Most post-revisionist accounts tend to acknowledge the inheritance of this controversy and overtly state their various viewpoints at the outset. See, for example, Ó’Gráda; Donnelly.
2. Further to this, Brawne writes of the art museum: “Art and the temple have a long association . . . but the temple . . . was a place of social significance open to the public as part of a ritual which went beyond everyday experience” (17), and Lorente, in *Cathedrals of Urban Modernity*, likens the generic art museum to “an urban cathedral.”
3. In this instance, their focus is specifically on the princely art collections, which were, nominally at least, replaced by those of public ownership with the rise of modern nation-hood. Hence, the viewing subject became the reading citizen.
4. Stallabrass provides an insightful account of the Vauxhall Pleasure Gardens in London, which I am taking as a generic type (170–207). Bennett explores the complexities of the museum-fair polemic in relation to the concept of the amusement park (3–4).
5. Leerssen discusses the permutations of the relationship between these two concepts with respect to literature and, in particular, the writings and imagery of James Joyce.
6. Sontag presents a thoughtful account of the relationship between photography and memory when she writes that, by comparison to non-stop stream imagery, “the photograph has the deeper bite. Memory freeze-frames; its basic unit is the single image . . . the photograph is like a quotation, or a maxim or proverb” (19).
7. This is not always the case in retrospective representations of the famine, as exemplified in one parallel literary analysis where the axis of difference has been identified in reverse. Kelleher discusses the relationship between the Big House and famine as portrayed in some such early-twentieth-century literature. She emphasizes an agenda often apparent in this genre, as evident in Edith Somerville’s 1925 *The Big House of Inver*, where an effort is made to re-write the roles played by the landlord class during the famine. For example, she notes: “Within the genre of Big House writing and its representations of famine recurs a striking motif: the encounter between upper-class woman and poor peasant in which food is exchanged for disease. The giver of fever, the ‘other’ from whom contagion is received, is cast in shadow; the heroic ancestor is named and remembered” (134).
8. The notion of imaginary orders is alluded to in Donald Preziosi’s essay “Brain of the Earth’s Body: Museums and the Framing of Modernity,” a critique of curatorial authority in museum and gallery practice. The idea of documentary in film and its difficult affiliation to interpretative practice is discussed by Trinh T. Minh-Ha in “The Totalizing Quest of Meaning.”
9. The term “invention of tradition” refers of course to ideas discussed in Hobsbawm and Ranger’s anthology *The Invention of Tradition*.

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Representation Matters

In the twenty-first century, the terms “representation” and “identity” seem to have gone out of fashion. The essays collected here, however, seek to demonstrate the extent to which they continue to *matter* in the social, political and cultural struggles waged by marginalized communities across our postcolonial and globalizing world. The volume starts by offering contingent readings of prominent identity-related concepts – hybridity, insularity, the west, ubuntu, and orientalism – which ask how these concepts translate into practical, situated ways of grappling with the legacies of colonialism. It continues by exploring the relational articulation of collective identities and their histories (as *shared* rather than competing), and the way origin narratives and notions of indigeneity, in contexts as diverse as Namibia, Uruguay and Bolivia, function not as fixed roots, but as constructed representations that are manipulated according to the demands of the present. Finally, tradition, too, emerges as open to continuous strategic re-invention in contributions dealing with female agency in a Hindu ritual, peasant understandings of modernity in Zimbabwe, the resurgence of Chinese culture in Indonesia, and André Brink’s rewriting of South African history.

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Frontispiece: Clothes store in the Golden Acre Mall, Cape Town, South Africa. Photograph by Anette Hoffmann (2006).

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