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The Great Irish Famine and the Development of Journalism

Michael Foley

Technological University Dublin, michael.foley@tudublin.ie

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**‘The Great Irish Famine and the Development of Journalism:’ paper
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By Michael Foley

This is an illustration of Brigid O'Donnell and her children, an image that appeared in the *Illustrated London News* in 1849. She is familiar to us from book covers and pamphlets, and she has inspired many contemporary images commemorating the Famine.

However, for us there are a number of reasons for interest. The first is that we know who she is, and that is unusual. Newspapers and periodicals at this period did *not* deal in human-interest stories, and did not tell us about the poor, except in the most general terms. The only way people like Brigid O'Donnell would have been named in a newspaper of the day was if she had appeared in court, or was before a public hearing, tribunal or an inquest. The poor were mentioned anonymously, of course, as part of a mob or peasantry, but they were seldom identified by name. The Irish were, according to John Kelly an 'undifferentiated mass'.

The second reason Mrs O'Donnell is of interest is because of the words that appeared beside her image.

I lived, she said, on the lands of Gurranenatuoha.(Garraunnatooha)
My husband held four acres and a half of land, and three acres of
bog land; our yearly rent was £7 4s.; we were put out last
November' she then describes how she and her husband were
cheated of their crops.... 'they wanted me to give possession. I said
that I would not' she continued, 'I had fever, and was within two
months of my down-lying (confinement); they commenced
knocking down the house, and had half of it knocked down when
two neighbours, women, Nell Spellesley and Kate How, carried me
out. I had the priest and doctor to attend me shortly after. Father
Meehan anointed me. I was carried into a cabin, and lay there for
eight days, when I had the creature (the child) born dead. I lay for
three weeks after that. The whole of my family got the fever, and
one boy thirteen years old died with want and with hunger while
we were lying sick. Dan Sheedey and Blake took the corn into
Kilrush, and sold it. I don't know what they got for it. I had not a
bit for my children to eat when they took it from me. (ILN, 1849,
Dec 22nd)

Here is a story, narrated by a woman, cheated of her home and
possessions, and devastated by the death of her 13-year-old son, in the
sure knowledge of her own not distant demise. This is told by means of
an interview.

The orthodoxy has it that the interview did not become a journalistic
device until much later in the century. In the US, the home of the
interview, the first real interview was conducted by Horace Greely, when
he interviewed Brigham Young, in August 1859. It was not until the
journalist, WT Stead, popularized the interview in the 1880s that it
became commonplace in the British press (Silvester, 1994: 3).

Yet, here we have an interview, with an Irish Famine victim in 1849, 30-
years before the first interviews were supposedly published in the British
press.

So what is the effect of the Bridget O'Donnel interview in the context of
the Famine? Her story was designed to concretise the event, to
communicate information directly from the person experiencing the
event, and to effect an emotional connection with the readers. Reports of
conditions in Ireland were so appalling as to defy credulity. Graphic
reports of death and disease in Ireland exceeded anything anyone in
England, or elsewhere, ever heard of, or read of. Journalists felt it

necessary to devise new means of authentication, of persuading its readers of the veracity of their stories. The use of the image, of course, also meant that the image needed an explanation. Despite appearances, images do not yield one fixed interpretation.

At its peak, the *ILN* had a circulation of about 300,000, and was the publication of choice for the Victorian middle classes, transforming illustrations into a credible, factual, news-reporting tool.

What Brigid O'Donnell achieved, or what was achieved in her name, was a sensational story, embedded in a respectable newspaper, and of significant news value. The point of the illustrated press was that it was about actuality – an actuality that was confirmed by both word and image. According to its own first issue:

The public will have henceforth under their glance and within their grasp the very form and presence of events as they transpire in all the substantial reality, and with evidence visible as well as circumstantial. (*ILN*, 14 May 1842)

Brigid O'Donnell was verifiably true, but what was unprecedented about her was the fact that the story of this poor, dispossessed Irish Famine victim was projected onto the international news stage, and her own words were used to convince the world of the facts of massive social and political injustice endured by the people of Ireland.

But why did journalists resort to such radical ways of reporting the famine?

In the 1840s, the journalists' armory was a limited one. Reporting consisted mainly of listening to judges and lawyers in court, and reporting them, and listening and reporting parliament, or taking down the words of men of respect and standing, and reporting them.

So here was a new profession – journalism (the first reporters was only hired in Ireland in 1824) – facing major changes, coinciding with the greatest catastrophe of 19th century Europe. And if journalists did not exactly know the extent of the calamity they were reporting, it must have become increasingly clear that the traditional ways of reporting, were not adequate to the horror story that was the Famine.

But along with the changes taking place within the newspaper industry economy, the really major changes with a philosophical one, the growth

of what the cultural historian, James Vernon, calls humanitarianism, or maybe empathy, and how this new idea of a concern for one's fellow human beings, informed newspapers and their coverage. It was also the first major disaster to be covered by the press and practices developed during the years of the famine remained part of the disaster coverage to this day.

The coverage of events in West Cork, for instance, shows an early development of news values. It also gave rise to the development of news as a particular narrative form, full of detail and first hand observations and, by any account, a good piece of reporting.

Despite its remoteness West Cork was accessible from a major city, Cork. Editors in Dublin and London, and even elsewhere, knew what was happening, as Cork had a number of newspapers whose coverage guaranteed the sort of copy and illustrations the London press wanted. The Diary of a Dispensary doctor, written Dr Daniel Donovan, doctor to the Skibbereen Dispensary and Union Workhouse appeared in the *Southern Reporter* throughout 1847 and 48, was reprinted in the ILN and other papers and was quoted in many more. The *Cork Examiner* had a special correspondent in Skibbereen, Jeremiah O'Callaghan, whose very regular dispatches from the area were often picked up and carried by other newspapers in Ireland and England. For editors, there was no risk in sending staff to west Cork, because editors were assured of good copy.

The Famine in Ireland between 1845 and 1852 was where new practices and new ways of telling stories, as well as a new self awareness of themselves as journalists, were tested. After the Famine Irish journalism developed speedily. Even though the population halved, the number of newspapers increased hugely. Irish journalists developed professional practices in the context of colonization and the Famine and how they struggled to cover it, was a major influence on them and their work.

So what purpose did Brigid O'Donnell serve? Her function was to personify an anonymous mass. She and similar images gave a human face to the Irish. As scholar, Susan Moeller wrote:

Starving children are the famine icon. An emaciated child is not yet associated with the stereotypes attached to its color, its culture, or its political environment. Skeletal children personify innocence abused. They bring moral clarity to the complex story of a famine. Their images cut through the social, economic, and political context to create an imperative statement. A Hierarchy of

Innocence.

She continues:

There are few other obvious innocents in this world than children. In depicting wars—or famines, for that matter—children (and their mothers) make ideal victims, while men associated with violent political factions can be murdered or can die by the thousands without creating a flutter of interest in their victim status: (Moeller. 2002: 36)

The Famine was complex. For most educated English people, it was not clear whose fault it was. Many subscribed to a Providentialist explanation, suggesting that it was the will of God. Others considered it the fault of the lazy and primitive Irish. Yet others blamed the grasping nature of Irish landlords.

The changes to newspapers taking place at this time are, of course, part of a wider debate about capitalism. The developments in democracy from the great reform bill, the debate about free trade and, of course, the role of the press in a free market democracy. Ireland is a contradiction, an integral part of the United Kingdom, but pre modern in its social relations. Terry Eagleton writes of Ireland entering modernity, and its press reflects that.

Because of the famine, Irish society undergoes a surreal speed-up of its entry upon modernity; but what spurs that process on is, contradictorily, a thoroughly traditional calamity. Part of the horror of the famine is its atavistic nature – the mind shaking fact that an event with all the pre-modern character of a medieval pestilence happened in Ireland with frightening recentness. (Eagleton, 1995)

Colonial conditions and the state of Irish capitalism delayed many of the economic developments within the media that took place in Britain, but the Famine did speed up the entry of the press into modernity, and offered a training ground for a generation of journalists in the use of the human interest story, the use of illustrations, the development of news values, as well as a sense of outrage that led many to combine journalism with politics.

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