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Ultimate Witnesses - The Visual Culture of Death, Burial and Mourning in Famine Ireland, Extract

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ULTIMATE WITNESSES

THE VISUAL CULTURE
OF DEATH, BURIAL,
& MOURNING IN
FAMINE IRELAND

NIAMH ANN KELLY

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of the Irish population had traveled from their careful vigilance over the dying as traumatic situations of torturous and grotesque death forcibly transformed parts of the landscape of Ireland into a bleak landscape of unintended gravesites. The significance of the rural Irish cottiers' and land-workers' pre-Famine mortuary rituals are pictorially recounted in paintings and illustrations from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Then – as more recently – cultural customs around death, burial, and mourning were intrinsic to both the formations of individual recall and constructed notions of collective memory, such as cultural memory, which Ann Rigney notes as “the product of representations” (15) and “always a form of vicarious memory” (25). She writes: “The term ‘cultural memory’ highlights the extent to which shared memories of the past are the product of mediation, textualization, and acts of communication” (14). As Elizabeth Hallam and Jenny Hockey note,

The social experiences of dying and death, together with memory processes that are activated in relation to them, are therefore enmeshed in wider political, religious and intellectual factors. These influence or sustain (or, conversely, work to erode) solitary as well as collective remembering so that we need to attend to the individual body and its relation to the social body in the act of making memory (16).



Figure 3 | Nathaniel Grogan the Elder, *The Wake*

PRE-FAMINE “ASSEMBLY CUSTOMS” AND THE MERRY WAKE

In vivid contrast to the overwhelming familial desolation and social isolation suggested by Davidson’s Famine image, pre-Famine paintings on the subject of bodies post-mortem demonstrate what Gearóid Ó Crualaoich has termed “assembly custom” (191) as a definitive aspect of Irish mortuary traditions. The continuance of the customary social gatherings in the face of sharp and repeated disapproval from religious and civil institutions and authorities, recorded as early as 1614 (174), was, Ó Crualaoich argues, a type of “resistance” to these controlling forces (173). The criticisms usually focused on the apparent excessive preparatory and hospitality costs, and on presumed impropriety of the livelier aspects of the merrymaking and consumption of alcohol at wakes. Pre-Famine mortuary and funerary practices integrated religious and pre-Christian, that is to say pagan and Celtic, traditions. The rituals were highly organized, social, and symbolic events that marked at once the passing of one life into the next world and the endurance of the community. Greatly thwarted by the Famine and its devastating fall-outs – firstly demographic and consequently cultural – mortuary customs were somewhat revitalized in late decades of the nineteenth century and into the early twentieth century. Even so, others felt changing social values in a post-Famine landscape implied wake conventions lacked respectability (Lysaght, “Hospitality” 417), and eventually more religious forms dominated Irish mortuary practices.

A wake, as depicted in *The Wake*, c. 1783, by Cork painter Nathaniel Grogan the Elder (1739/40–1807), occurred after the laying out of the body, which was generally a private affair, and before the funeral and burial of the deceased [Figure 3]. In this painting the corpse is depicted laid out and dressed in a white shroud. Habits or special dress were also used in some regions. The strategic arranging of white sheets, as shown, was common in the laying-out ritual (Ó Crualaoich 180), as was the setting of candles near the corpse (Kinmonth 166). Such sheets were typically stored for the purposes of wakes and utilized across a given community (Ó Crualaoich 180). After the body of the deceased had been left for a time – sometimes with big toes tied together until the body was cold (Ó Crualaoich 181) – then washed and dressed, it was usually laid out on a prominent piece of furniture, such as a kitchen table. The positioning of a corpse at a wake indicated their role as “host of the occasion” (Lysaght, “Hospitality” 419).

A wake began when wider family and community gathered to celebrate and mourn the deceased, and it usually continued over at least two nights (Ó Súilleabháin 53–4). This gave mourners a chance to travel from other townlands, with overnight vigils implicit in the name, “wake” being the translation of the Gaelic terms *tórramb* (funeral or gathering) or *faire* (vigil). Grogan’s painted wake is in a barn-like space with domestic trappings, as noted by Claudia Kinmonth (165). This reflects on the extent of the social occasion: the home of the deceased was a preferable location, but if the crowd proved too large, a nearby larger building was used. The formation of the group in the foreground, the welcome implied by the roaring fire on the right, and a woman smoking a clay pipe on the left of the scene are suggestive of the expected atmosphere of merriment and social entertainment at wakes.

Though Grogan was primarily a landscape artist (Dunne 8), Tom Dunne observes that the relative scarcity of Irish genre pictures, when compared to contemporary England, makes the genre element of Grogan’s *oeuvre* all the more valuable (88).³ Nicola Figgis suggests that “For Grogan the representation of character and the injection of humour were more important considerations” (277) than academic practice. The license of gentle humor is apparent in this work, in particular with Grogan’s attention to the semi-circular group in the foreground – with a figure in the center – whose formation suggests some of the social games played at wakes. A “borekeen” was a master of merriment who organized interactive games – some with pagan origin – storytelling, and even tricks or pranks. Grogan’s image may be a depiction of a game similar to the “brogue about”. In this an old shoe is passed around a circular group of men on the floor, under raised knees. As a person in the middle of the group tries to find it, they are hit on the back with the shoe (Ó Crualaoich 186).

While a number of games pitted group against group, many involved an individual targeted by a group. Ó Súilleabháin recounts witnessing “croosting” (66), which consisted of the throwing of pieces of turf – or whatever was to hand, such as potatoes or clay pipes broken for the purpose – generally in the direction of a cranky individual. Other games incorporated “set pieces”, as described by Ó Crualaoich, such as men forming a human pyramid, with the highest man left dangling from a roof’s cross-beam as those below run off (185). This type of horseplay extended to a variety of high-spirited games that had potential to, and sometimes did, result in actual combat, and, on occasion, even led to faction fighting. The range of pranks played were considerable, from pepper mixed into shared pipe tobacco resulting in sneezing mourners, or the tying of bootlaces of individuals sitting beside each other, to leaving a player who had been blindfolded during a game alone with the corpse in the house (Ó Súilleabháin 67).

Though the more boisterous pranks and games were largely the domain of men, facilitated by the borekeen, other set games included both men and women, and took the form of satirical play, commonly mocking various institutions of the Church,

such as marriage. Dancing and courting between the sexes was also common, as was matchmaking. The effusive tone and raucous nature of these activities were implicated in the Church’s regular condemnation of wakes, leading to the issuing over a period of three hundred years of edicts aimed at suppressing such traditions (Ó Súilleabháin *passim*). Patricia Lysaght argues that the more licentious games were “concerned, on a symbolic level, with the perpetuation of the life of the community” (“Hospitality” 419).

The family of the deceased provided what food and drink they could afford, such as meat, bread, whiskey, and brandy, with plates of snuff and “bodhrán-fuls of clay pipes” also offered to mourners (Ó Crualaoich 184). At wakes in County Galway the pipes were known as “Lord ha mercies” (Ó Crualaoich 187), an abbreviation of a common blessing for the deceased: May the Lord have mercy on his/her soul. The hospitality provided was considered “commensurate with the deceased’s social position” (Lysaght, “Hospitality” 407), and was intended to maintain the family’s position and “merit the good will and respect of the neighbours” (Lysaght, “Hospitality” 407). As a culturally crucial part of the process of mourning, wakes were prepared for years in advance, with laying-out and burial garments sought out and paid for, even ahead of day-to-day clothing needs (Ó Crualaoich 174; Lysaght, “Hospitality” 405). Religious components were also key to pre-Famine mortuary rites: blessings and prayers, including the rosary and *de profundis*, were recited; rosary beads intertwined the fingers of the corpse, and a funeral Mass was said before the burial.

In the background of Grogan’s painting, the old women by the corpse may well be depictions of keeners – or cryers – who, along with family members, cried at strategic moments. The term “keen” is an anglicized version of the Gaelic word for crying, *caoineadh*. Customarily, the family of the deceased would keen at the beginning of a wake. Women who regularly keened at wakes would then sustain the keening and lamentations at intervals throughout the night. This practice greatly intensified the emotional pitch of the event (Lysaght, “Caoineadh” 74), but could also result in competitive keening, which in turn could occasionally lead to a humorous spectacle of keeners insulting each other (Lysaght, “Caoineadh” 71).

Keeners were paid with food or “whiskey or tobacco or a few shillings” (Ó Coileáin 107). Angela Bourke notes that for professional keeners, usually older women “experienced in loss and grief”, it was their sole means of support (“Inner lives” 15). Their lamentations were metrically defined and drew on formulae of lament poetry. Some have survived, with intervention and revision, as poems celebrating the lives of heroic figures, such as the epic *Lament for Art O’Leary*.⁴ Described by Bourke as “elaborate verbal art” (“Inner lives” 16), the textual content of performed laments were not only centered on the dead but expanded upon a range of topics regarding the company present, their history and conduct (“Inner lives” 14, 16). Seán Ó Coileáin notes that the decline of keening through the nineteenth century was in large part due to pressure from the Church, which considered it, along with other



Figure 4 | Frederic William Burton, *The Aran Fisherman's Drowned Child*

wake practices, to be abhorrent (115). He acknowledges that the Famine hastened this process, as “the social significance of death, the need and opportunity to mark it off” were lost (115).

As agents of “mournful transition” for the dead from one life to another (Ó Cruailaoich 192), keeners were integral to the mourning process at both wakes and burials. In Frederic William Burton’s (1816–1900) watercolor painting *The Aran Fisherman’s Drowned Child* (1841), the tragedy of the sudden passing of the young child is stated not only with the despairing demeanors of the family but by the dramatic gestures of the keening woman lamenting the dead child [Figure 4].⁵ Already, the community has gathered and the shawled women at the door have the appearance of keeners.

At a wake following an unexpected or tragic death, such as depicted by Burton, a more somber tone would prevail than that following the death of an elderly person deemed to have lived a full life. Unexpected deaths were often attributed to the fairies, and were mourned with greater superstition. Superstitions about fairies and or supposed supernatural phenomena manifested across the spectrum of mortuary and mourning practices, from harbingers of death to the burial of the corpse. For example, the banshee was thought to be a female supernatural death-messenger whose cry foretold a death. “Banshee” is the anglicized form of the Irish *bean-sidhe*, meaning “woman of the fairies” – as Lysaght phrases it, “otherworld woman” (“Banshee” 158), whose non-verbal cry is “loud, plaintive and intensely lonesome” (“Banshee” 159). In some cases the fairies were said to leave signs predicting a death, or a death-tick could be “heard” in the walls or furniture of a house when a death was imminent. Fairy keening heard during a wake was not considered frightening as it suggested an expression of respect for the dead from the so-called “other side” (Ó Cruailaoich 178). It was also widely considered unlucky to leave a wake alone or between midnight and daybreak, as spirits – of both the fairies and the dead – were thought to be active.

According to Bourke, fairy legends reflected on societal anxiety around fertility (*Burning of Bridget Cleary* 36) and circumstances of mortality, such as childbirth, which were related by stories of women swept through the air (*Burning of Bridget Cleary* 37). Difficult behavior – in infants in particular – and mental illnesses were theorized through tales of changelings and fairy abductions (*Burning of Bridget Cleary* 4, 30). Timothy Corrigan Correll outlines how “belief in fairies and folk healers existed in a dialectical relationship with disbelief” (14), and notes that discussions centered on supernatural or magical forces were a feature of fireside storytelling at wakes and other night-time rural gatherings (3). The archive of the NFC includes wide variations of these stories of contestation, and, as Bourke notes, fairy legends were linked to notable aspects of known landscapes (*Burning of Bridget Cleary* 8).

The Aran Fisherman's Drowned Child brought Burton much public acclaim as a young artist, and was the most popular print ever reproduced by the Royal Irish Art Union (Marie Bourke 7). Born in Corofin, County Clare, Burton's empathy with the scene is clear in the emotional mood of the depiction and his attention to contemporary detail. Though Brian Kennedy writes that Burton visited the Aran Islands several times between 1838 and 1841 with the antiquarian George Petrie (23), Marie Bourke suggests the work was first modeled in the Claddagh in Galway and later completed in Dublin (cited in Kinmonth 168). He made over fifty studies for this studio painting, and modeled the figures on relatives and friends (Marie Bourke 7). Brian P. Kennedy observes that Burton's use of watercolors was so controlled that his works have the initial appearance of oil paintings (23), which might be explained by the extensive preparatory work. The details of the clothing are accurately observed for the period, and the domestic setting gives a good sense of the interior of single-roomed mud-built cottages of the Famine era.

At a time when the British art establishment tended toward either sentiment or outright pictorial mockery of Irish customs, sincere observation of Irish social life and mores was central to the work of another young Irish artist: painter and illustrator, Cork-born Daniel Macdonald (1821–53). He was twenty-one and living in Cork city when he made the drawing *Returning from an Irish Funeral* [Figure 5].⁶ Niamh O'Sullivan draws attention to “the humour and jollity of carnivalesque aspects of everyday life” in the image (*In the Lion's Den* 70). The atmosphere is lively, as funeral-goers and gravediggers ride home on the small, covered, two-wheeled, horse-drawn cart. While the scene's pictorial silhouette is imbued with the culturally symbolic markers of a round tower and ruined church, it also documents a bare-footed boy, pigs, geese, and a dog, and a rough terrain as a road. Life goes on, as the graveyard is barely visible in the background.

Commonly, on removal from the wake house, the coffin was laid down on chairs outside the home of the deceased for a few moments. The routes taken to a grave were often inclusive of symbolic stops, which reflected on a range of social complexities. These decisions were dependent on the type of death that had taken place and on inter-familial relations within the community, as well as on superstitions associated with the death. The digging of the grave and physical burial of the body were also symbolically and sometimes superstitiously devised, with regional variation regarding how and by whom these were conducted. It is reported, for example, that in County Galway, so as to avoid fairies and bad luck, a coffin was never left down on its way to the grave (Ó Cruaíoch 190), and in County Cork two shovels were left crossed on a dug grave to prevent spirit or fairy intervention before burial (Ó Cruaíoch 188). While a funeral Mass or prayers usually took place at the house of the deceased or sometimes at a nearby church, the burial itself was often conducted without a priest.

Macdonald's image highlights the social nature of pre-Famine obsequies, where private loss was transformed, through variously enacted mortuary and funerary customs, into a public and shared form of mourning. The “social cathartic chaos out of which a new social order can emerge” (Ó Cruaíoch 191) was implied in the robustly vivacious aspects of Irish mourning games, and is here suggested by the exuberance of this fast-moving and unruly post-funeral cortège.

Within a shockingly short period of time, as the Famine and its far-reaching effects transpired, such meaningful cultural practices around death were impossible, and the act of dying itself was depleted of its capacity for signifying social dignity.



Figure 5 | Daniel Macdonald, *Returning from an Irish Funeral*

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Wicklow-born Davidson traveled abroad frequently, and exhibited regularly at the Watercolour Society and the Royal Hibernian Academy in Dublin.
- ² Susie Linfield uses the term to describe experiences of “defeat and atrocity” (xiv).
- ³ From an artisan background, Grogan spent some years in America, then returned to Cork, where he made a living as a landscape artist, book illustrator, and art teacher.
- ⁴ The fascinating complexities of this famous example are discussed in detail by Lysaght (“Caoineadh os coinn coirp”) and Ó Coileáin.
- ⁵ Burton studied art in Dublin and exhibited regularly in Ireland and Dublin, and was popular as a portraitist. Burton stopped painting when he became director of the National Gallery in London for twenty years from 1874.
- ⁶ Two years later Macdonald moved to London, where he achieved moderate academic success, exhibiting at the British Institute and the Royal Hibernian Academy, Dublin (Murray 178). In 1847 he exhibited in London his painting *The Discovery of the Potato Blight*, now housed at University College, Dublin.
- ⁷ Belfast-born Brandt spent most of her life in Dublin, was a member of the Royal Hibernian Academy, a professional portraitist, and a governor of the National Gallery of Ireland.
- ⁸ Cristin Leach, “Muriel Brandt’s 1916 Breadline”, *Sunday Times* (Ireland), March 17, 2016.
- ⁹ Discussed in O’Sullivan, *The Tombs of a Departed Race*, 25–6.
- ¹⁰ Dáil Éireann, vol. 477, 26 March, 1997. All currency is in Irish pounds (*punt*), the national currency of the time.
- ¹¹ Carved by stonemason Brendan O’Riordan.
- ¹² Mulholland proposed that her sculpture would lie in greater isolation on the site, on a low bier-like platform (Mark-Fitzgerald 123–4).

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IMAGES

Cover

(Henry) Mark Anthony
1817–86
Sunset (View of the Rock of Cashel from the Village)
Oil on canvas
51 x 51 in (129.5 x 129.5 cm)
Image provided by Ireland's Great Hunger Museum, Quinnipiac University

Figure 1

Muriel Brandt
1909–81
An Gorta
c. 1946
Oil on canvas
Image provided by National Museum of Ireland
© 2017 Artists Rights Society, New York/IVARO, Dublin

Figure 2

Lilian Lucy Davidson
1879–1954
Gorta
1946
Previously known as *Burying the Child*
Oil on canvas
27.5 x 35.5 in (70 x 90 cm)
© Estate of Lilian Lucy Davidson
Image provided by Ireland's Great Hunger Museum, Quinnipiac University

Figure 3

Nathaniel Grogan the Elder
1740–1807
The Wake
c. 1783
Oil on panel
18.5 x 24.5 in (47 x 62.2 cm)
Gift of the Martin I. and Margaret J. Zankel Revocable Trust and of the West Family Trust to the Fine Arts Museums Foundation
Image provided by the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco

Figure 4

Frederic William Burton
1816–1900
The Aran Fisherman's Drowned Child
1841
Watercolour on paper
34.8 x 30.9 in (88.4 x 78.5 cm)
National Gallery of Ireland Collection, NGI.6048
Photo © National Gallery of Ireland

Figure 5

Daniel Macdonald
1820–53
Returning from an Irish Funeral
1842
Pen and ink on paper
22.5 x 27.3 in (57 x 69 cm)
Image provided by Ireland's Great Hunger Museum, Quinnipiac University

Figure 6

Muriel Brandt
1909–81
An Gorta [Detail]
c. 1946
Oil on canvas
Image provided by National Museum of Ireland
© 2017 Artists Rights Society, New York/IVARO, Dublin

Figure 7

James Mahony
1810–59
"Funeral at Shepperton Lakes"
Illustrated London News
February 13, 1847
Image provided by Ireland's Great Hunger Museum, Quinnipiac University

Figure 8

Famine Era Coffin Cross. Text purportedly written by Dr Thomas Willis
Presentation Sisters, St Anne's Retreat and Conference Centre, Killenard, Portarlington, County Laois
Image provided by author

Figure 9

Henry Smith
"The Famine in Ireland - Funeral at Skibbereen - from a Sketch by Mr H. Smith"
Illustrated London News
January 30, 1847
Image provided by Ireland's Great Hunger Museum, Quinnipiac University

Figure 10

Carolyn Mulholland
Famine memorial, Famine graveyard, Clones, County Monaghan
2001
Bronze
Photograph by Geri Kelly
© Carolyn Mullholland

Figure 11

Swinford Famine plot. Mass Famine grave, Swinford, County Mayo
Image provided by author

Figure 12

Carrigastira Famine graveyard, County Cork
Image provided by author

Figure 13

Famine Garden of Remembrance, Carrick-on-Shannon, County Leitrim
Image provided by author

Figure 14

Celia Griffin Memorial Park, Galway
Image provided by Des Kelly

Figure 15

"View of Gort na Cille Graveyard. Unbaptised children and Famine victims reputedly buried here. Kilcrohane, Bantry, County Cork (1977)"
Photograph by Séamas Mac Philib
© National Folklore Collection, UCD

Figure 16

Alanna O'Kelly
b. 1955
Sanctuary/Wasteland
1994
Video still
Image provided by Irish Museum of Modern Art
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