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Ian Kilroy
_Technological University Dublin_, ian.kilroy@tudublin.ie

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Exposing England for Famine wrongs

The Famine Plot

England’s Role in Ireland’s Greatest Tragedy

By Tim Pat Coogan

Palgrave Macmillan, €15

Reviewed by Ian Kilroy

In Tim Pat Coogan’s fair-minded book, The Famine Plot, a well-researched and readable interrogation of an important question: was the English Whig government complicit in genocide during the Great Irish Famine of the 1840s?

No stranger to controversy, Coogan presents a thesis that will be hotly debated in Ireland and abroad – as much, if not more than his previous writings on Eamon de Valera and Michael Collins.

Coogan’s is a tale of heroes and villains, where often the same actor goes from hero to villain and back again, depending on the context. In other words, this is no simple-minded, reductive narrative. The incredible complexity of the Famine, both politically and on a human level, is honoured here.

But if there is one clear villain on this stage, it is to be found in the person of Sir Charles Trevelyan, the British civil servant responsible for overseeing ‘relief efforts’ in Ireland throughout the mass starvation.

A cold and heartless bureaucrat, Trevelyan’s near religious belief in the free market and self-sufficiency was an indigestible soup thickened unpleasantly with a dose of anti-Irish racism and an Evangelical belief in Providence.

These philosophies manifested themselves in ways that helped contribute to the deaths of a million people: namely his scaling back of relief at the height of the Famine and his government’s refusal to close the ports, from where every week life-saving food was hae mor rhaging onto the international markets. There are many lessons in the story for us today, in case we grow too self-satisfied as students of history.

Trevelyan’s deadly influence is remembered in the folk ballad The Fields of Athenry. But if the ballad is the history of the vanquished, it is left to the historian to capture more than the emotional truth of the past. Indeed, Coogan succeeds in both respects – humanising the tragedy that was the Famine and forcibly piecing together its causes and conditions.

That emotional reality is movingly evoked in such stories as that of John and Mary Willis, who left Limerick for Canada in 1847. Before sailing, one of their children contracted typhus, which would result in the boy’s certain death. The disease rendered the whole family ineligible to sail together, so the family abandoned their little boy to die alone, hoping to save themselves through emigration. However, the other children and their father died on the voyage to Canada, leaving only Mary Willis as witness to their awful fate.

The Famine Plot really does bring home the horror of those years. It summons the repressed memory of ‘the Great Hunger’, forcing us to face who we are and where we have come from.

From the mother that cannibalised the leg of her dead son through starvation to the many families turned out by landlords to face death in the freezing sleet of winter, Coogan brings all the skill of an accomplished narrative journalist to his subject. Yet the work is as much polemic as history, placing it somewhat beyond the dry, objective approach of the academy and closer to the impassioned argument of the convinced. But then, Coogan’s conviction has a basis in evidence, and evidence which is methodically presented throughout his 13 chapters.

It was Whig policy to clear the land of the mass of peasantry. It was the architecture of the so-called ‘relief’ that led to those murderous evictions. It was a deliberate standing-by while millions starved.

And all justified by the kind of official British discourse so evident in the pages of The Times, which swayed public opinion to believe the Irish were indolent, ungrateful and racially as well as religiously inferior untiermen.

Coogan’s committed nationalist analysis is far from bigoted and is plausible. It brings to mind Harvard economics professor Amartya Sen’s assertion that “no famine has ever taken place in the history of the world in a functioning democracy”. It reminds us of the fiction that was the ‘United’ Kingdom after the 1800 Act of Union and prompts us to remember why remaining within the union was never within our best interests – despite the persistent failures of our first republic.

But crucially, does Coogan persuade in his assertion of genocide? To quote the UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, genocide is “committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group” by, among other things, “deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part”.

Coogan postpones addressing the genocide question until near the end of his book, and it’s a troubling decision, which serves to somewhat undermine any firm conclusion. How much deliberate intention has Coogan proved? Did the patrician, Victorian discourse of the times disguise a murderous aim? And what of the issue of applying a 20th century concept anachronistically?

Coogan has served the dead well with his intellectual and thoughtful discourse. Like all big, contested questions, the definitive answer might never be settled on. Still, Tim Pat Coogan has marshalled some solid evidence for one side of this ongoing debate.

Ian Kilroy is a lecturer in journalism at DIT.