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‘at the altar of memory’: Great Irish Famine Memorials in Words and Images

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Cover Page Footnote
Sincere gratitude is extended to the author's fellow editors of this special issue, and to the Journal's editors for their tireless efforts and indefatigable patience. Most of all, the author wishes to thank all of the 'Famine Walk' travelers, visitors and mourners who shared feelings, insights, and family stories while visiting commemorative sites dedicated to the victims of An Gorta Mór. Go raibh mile maith agaibh go léir.

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Throughout the world, wherever people from Ireland migrated in the mid-nineteenth century due to the travail of the Great Famine, one finds travelers eager to learn more about the relatively unknown story of what is more commonly referred to today as An Gorta Mór, The Great Hunger, The Great Starvation, or, to be most accurate with the Irish language translation, The Great Hurt (Kinealy, 2002: 2). A major current of modern travel is ‘dark tourism’ or ‘dark pilgrimage,’ journeys undertaken to historic sites of tragedy in order to express sorrow, to demonstrate solidarity, to recover identity, and even to seek reparation. Travelers take ownership of a woeful past to alleviate the pains of injury caused by An Gorta Mór; they visit the sites where the horrendous events occurred, witness their aftermaths, and participate in a shared recuperation. This is how the past becomes present; it is also how pilgrimage fulfills one of its promises to become transformative on personal, communal, and global levels.

Most visitors to Great Hunger memorials, whether they come singly, in pairs or in droves, are on these sorts of commemorative quests. Longing for a chance to pay their respects, they wend their way to sites as near as their own hometowns and as far scattered as the satellite memorials of Montréal, Toronto, Boston and New York (Mark-Fitzgerald, 2015). One man revealed that it was his lifelong wish to visit Grosse Île, Canada, where some of his kin, after having fled Ireland, perished all the same. ‘I have been given a chance to grieve,’ he told me.

During its most baleful years of 1845-1852, An Gorta Mór claimed over one million lives; another million-and-a-half fled starvation and disease on ‘coffin ships’ which all too often became, as Daniel O’Connell labeled them, ‘ocean hearses’ (Potter, 1960: 155). When the potato failed, the indigent succumbed because even basic nutrition was beyond their means or because it was earmarked for lucrative export.

Relief measures, frightfully inadequate and often ill-conceived, failed to stem the tide of suffering, and attitudes toward the needy were full of castigation and blame (Daly, 1995: 126). One Cambridge University professor opined:

The people of England and of Ireland . . . are among the most dissimilar nations in Europe. One is chiefly Protestant, the other is chiefly Roman Catholic; one is principally manufacturing and commercial, the other almost wholly agricultural; one lives chiefly in towns, the other in the country. The population of one [England] is laborious . . . no fatigue repels them—no amusement diverts them from the business of providing the means of subsistence . . . That of the other [Ireland] is indolent and idle (cited in Small, 1998: 20).

With dominant ideas about a denigrated ‘other’ holding sway, it is little wonder that, for nearly a century, knowledge about An Gorta Mór was destroyed, obscured and/or suppressed (Kinealy 1995: 29; Lee 1995; Ó Gráda, 1992: 87-102). Largely told...
only in whispers or in the confines of family anecdotes and narratives, folkloric accounts revealed tales of what had happened in communities and local districts:

> There were houses in this district in which all died of fever and none were buried. Things were so bad at that time that no one cared how the other was. Every household was left to itself and no one would come in or out of it. Families began to die and the rest were so weak and far spent that they could do nothing for them but leave them until the last one in the house died. All in the house died and bodies lay here and there through it. They were never moved from it . . . (cited in Quinn, 2001: 79).

However, the overall tone was one of silence:

> The land of song was no longer tuneful; or, if a human sound met the traveler’s ear, it was only that of the feeble and despairing wail for the dead. This awful, unwonted silence . . . during the famine and subsequent years, struck . . . fearfully upon [the people’s] imaginations . . . (Petrie, 1855: xii).

If there was little to sing about, there was also little to talk about, especially in the mother tongue. Many of those who perished from the hard-hit areas had learned Irish at their mothers’ knees without a written form; many survivors who took to the high seas were native monolingual speakers of Irish as well. How could the latter tell of their travail in the language of the destination societies to which they traveled? By and large, their suffering had muted them:

> It is not surprising [that] they never wanted to talk about it and who could blame them . . . they were ripped from their families, catapulted across the bitter bowl of tears . . . [they] arrived penniless, many speaking no English (Irish Central, 2012).

Only in recent times scholars, professional and amateur alike, are translating the few recorded testimonies in Irish Gaelic and lifting the veils of reticence regarding the cultural, economic, social, religious and geographic realities of what happened between the fateful years of 1845-1852 (Kinealy, 1997; Ó Gráda, 1999; Ó Murchada, 2013; Quinn, 2018). In the process of learning about those wrenching times, tourists and travelers are visiting sites and monuments in their resolve to keep the story of An Gorta Mór alive. This is productive pilgrimage, travel that refines and restores memories threatened with the same extinction as those mourned.

This photographic essay seeks to provide yet another dimension to the opening of what has remained too long out of sight and out of mindfulness. Allowing the words and images to speak for themselves in a minimalist fashion, it is a small compendium of what my fellow ‘pilgrims’ told me as we moved through the sacred spaces of An Gorta Mór monuments in Ireland, Canada and the United States. Together we came to understand how memorialization ‘helps people cope with the existential dramas of our human condition in post secular society’ (Margry, 2011, 8). We came to the experiential understanding that memorials hold not only the dark and bitter truths; they occupy carved shelters for memories where surviving generations can pause to bear witness and mourn. As grandchildren and great-grandchildren burning with a desire to know the truth of our families’ pasts, we cobbled together fragments of ‘who’s who,’ reminded that ours are not the first searches; indeed, thousands more were made during the staggered afterlife of An Gorta Mór as well. One of many entries in the Society of Missing Friends reads:

> Of BRIDGET CARROLL, a native of Killacooly, parish of Drumcliff, co. Sligo, who was taken into Grosse Isle hospital, below Quebec, in June last, and has not been heard from since. Any information respecting her will be thankfully received by her brother, Patrick Carroll, care of Mr. Samuel Downer, Second street, South Boston, Ms. 1 January 1848 (Irish Central, 2012).

And so our journey begins at Grosse Île, an island in the Saint Laurence River of Canada, and the Irish Memorial National Historic Site.

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'I am but one of so many descendants who stand at the altar of memory in reverence, hungering to know the story that ultimately illuminates my life.'

Figure 1: Installation in the lazaretto [hospital] at Grosse Île, Quebec, Canada.

E. Moore Quinn, 2017. Used with Permission.
‘... we are here in great privilege to remember . . .’

Figure 2: Tourists boarding the ferry to Grosse Île’s Irish Memorial National Historic Site, Quebec, Canada.
E. Moore Quinn, 2017. Used with permission.
‘Our people have suffered great losses . . . We are here to heal the past and work for a future free of such devastating loss.’

Figure 3: Tourists entering the lazaretto [hospital] at Grosse Île’s Irish Memorial, Quebec, Canada.

E. Moore Quinn, 2017. Used with Permission.
‘... I blinked away the tears as the priest sprinkled holy water onto the engraved names... his simple gesture reminding me of oceans crossed, salty tears of loss shed. My people... were represented among the names inscribed...’

Figure 4: Partial view of the list of names who perished at Grosse Île’s Irish Memorial, Quebec, Canada.

E. Moore Quinn, 2017. Used with permission.
‘The memorial, so tall and majestic, erected so many years ago, still stands and gives memory to tragedy . . . ’

Figure 5: The Celtic Cross at Grosse Île’s Irish Memorial, Quebec, Canada.
E. Moore Quinn, 2017. Used with Permission.
'Here in Cohasset, bodies thrown from the Brig St. John, children, mothers, fathers, aunts, uncles [were] lost to the towering gales of the Atlantic that taunted them with the site of the shore yet making land impossible. . . .'

'. . . I’m struck with the tale of the bundle that is discovered, an infant who has somehow survived, an infant who becomes a long time inhabitant of Cohasset, who lives to raise a family, whose descendants are here in this town.'
‘... visiting the Brig St. John Memorial ... always makes me think of my Father’s mother ... whose family emigrated from Ireland in the same year (1849) in three separate groups. Fortunately they all survived the horrific journey and settled in New York City. Honora, my grandmother, went on to marry another Famine survivor ... who emigrated as a young orphan after his parents died.’

‘Their courage and determination in facing the multiple barriers of discrimination and [trying to] make the most of the opportunities in this country have always inspired me. When I think of those who died off the coast of Cohasset because of a Nor’easter, it makes me all the more aware that but for the Grace of God, my grandmother could have suffered the same fate.’

Figure 7: Base of the Celtic Cross Memorial, Cohasset, Massachusetts.

E. Moore Quinn, 2015. Used with Permission.
‘. . . reminiscent of past memorials visited . . . graveyards of white crosses signify the lives taken by devastating hunger and accompanying disease; white crosses . . . and stones upon stones . . . some marked only with an x.’

Figure 8: The graveyard of victims of An Gorta Mór buried at Grosse Île’s Irish Memorial National Historic Site, Quebec, Canada.

E. Moore Quinn, 2017. Used with permission.
'I remember the search for the ‘black rock,’ which bustling commuters pass by daily without so much as a glance, but which to me represented the pilgrim’s search for another nugget of the story, another link in the chain of Irish migration to an oilean úr, the new world . . .'.

Figure 9. The Black Rock Monument, Montréal, Canada. Part of the inscription reads, ‘To preserve from desecration the remains of the 6,000 immigrants who died of ship fever A.D. 1847-48.’

E. Moore Quinn, 2016. Used with Permission.
‘What drives me to the shore of this site, to the other sites, what has driven me to New York City where stones from every county in Ireland come together in the remembrance of horror so long ago?’

Figure 10: Irish Hunger Memorial, Battery Park, New York City.

E. Moore Quinn, 2017. Used with permission.
‘How can I do any less than remember and salute them?’

Figure 11: Sculptures of the Ireland Park Famine Memorial, Toronto, Canada.

E. Moore Quinn, 2016. Used with Permission.
‘I’ll always remember learning that the Doolough poor and starving had walked miles, as they had been instructed to do, only to be told that the inspectors were at lunch and could not be disturbed.’

Figure 12: The Doolough Famine Walk Memorial, Leenane, County Mayo, Ireland.

E. Moore Quinn, 2017. Used with permission.
‘I have traveled from upstate New York to be here and attend a memorial Mass for those lost so many years ago.’

Figure 13: Famine Graveyard Memorial, Skibbereen, County Cork, Ireland.

E. Moore Quinn, 2016. Used with Permission.
‘My heart swelled in acknowledgement of their belief in a better life, their journey to a new world, their indefatigable hope...’

Figure 14: Irish Famine Monument, Cambridge, MA. The base reads: ‘Never Again Should a People Starve in a World of Plenty.’

E. Moore Quinn, 2017. Used with permission.
‘. . . My own future is assured by their devotion.’

Figure 15: Plot of the un-coffined victims of An Gorta Mór, Famine Graveyard, Skibbereen, County Cork, Ireland.

E. Moore Quinn, 2016. Used with Permission.
‘They raised a family of ten and worked very hard to educate them, including the daughters.’
'As we walk . . . I realize the blessing of this memorial, like the others, is to bring people together as one, to call upon ancestors to fill our hearts with compassion. That is the best part of peace.'

Figure 17: Irish Hunger Memorial, Battery Park, New York City.

E. Moore Quinn, 2017. Used with Permission.
‘I have been given a chance to grieve . . .’

Figure 18: Plaque in the Famine Graveyard, Skibbereen, County Cork, Ireland.

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Bibliography


