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There was none died around here with hunger in the Famine

Oral traditions of the Great Irish Famine

by

Laura Brennan B.A.

A thesis submitted to the University of Dublin, Trinity College in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor in Philosophy

May 2003
Irish Folklore Commission Questionnaire: The Great Famine of 1845 – 1852

1. Are there any local traditions about the manner in which the blight first appeared? How was the crop affected (while growing, before being dug, or when stored)? Did the blight return on successive years at that time?

2. Please write down any stories or traditions you can find locally about the following: Famine deaths, burials, graves, graveyards, the Cholera in your district; local fever hospitals at the time.

3. Can you give any accounts of the dissolution of individual local families during the Famine (or soon afterwards) by death or migration (to other districts) or emigration (to other countries)? Where did those who left the districts go? Passage money, emigrant ships.

4. Local evictions during or soon after the Famine. What was the attitude of the local landlords, merchants and shopkeepers, well-to-do families and priests to the people during the Famine; alms, credits, mortgages on land, seizures, evictions etc. Local ‘Poorhouses.’ Homeless individuals.

5. Food during the Famine: types of food available locally; uses made of special foods (herbs etc.). Food-centres set up by the government and various societies; local soup-kitchens: how run, individuals associated with them; conditions (if any) attached to the receipt of food at some of those centres. Souperism and proselytism in your district during the Famine (it is necessary to distinguish between centres at which proselytism was carried and those at which it was not). Any accounts of the forcible taking of food (crops, cattle etc.) and of means taken to counter it (man-traps etc.)
6. Accounts of local relief schemes during the Famine (road-making, drainage etc.). Financing of these schemes, pay, stewards, choice of workers, value of the work done. Attitudes of the people generally and of the well-to-do farmers to relief schemes.
Appendix Two

Examples of some of the questions, relating to the Famine, brought to the attention of collectors by Sean Ó Súilleabáin in *A Handbook of Irish Folklore*.¹

**Famine Years**

By what names was the Famine of 1847 known locally: the Bad Times, An Droch-Shaoghal, An Gorta Mor, Bliain an Ghorta? Did the Famine affect the people of your district very much? Write down all available stories and accounts about it under the following heads: condition of the local community prior to the Famine, density of population, main sources of food supply, how the blight came on the potato crop, attempts to counteract it, quality of potato and grain crops during those years, special foods used by the people (list of herbs, plants, roots, fruits, sea-growths, shellfish, various kinds of flesh, animal blood, meal, and other substitutes used to supplement the ordinary diet). Attempts made by the people to secure food (taking of crops and cattle belonging to others, man traps and warning notices etc.). Give an account of the privations suffered by the local people as a result of the Famine; hunger, cold, sickness, fever, cholera, evictions, death, dissolution of families. Write down accounts of local graves and graveyards which came into being during the Famine. Stories of kindness and generosity shown by the people to one another at that time; accounts of help given by benevolent societies and hospitable individuals (well-to-do farmers, landlords, priests and ministers, shop-keepers etc.)

**Relief of the suffering**

What local schemes were adopted by the people themselves, by the government, or by benevolent societies to relieve distress? Give as much detail as possible with regard to your own district. Distribution of soup and meal (‘soup-kitchens’, ‘*tighthe praisce*’, ‘*tighthe hrocain*’, ‘*brot*’, Indian meal, meal obtained from wrecked ships etc.). By whom was this food distributed locally? How was it cooked and divided? Meal earned in wages or in exchange for land. Work provided as relief schemes: accounts of roads, bridges, piers and harbours built during the Famine; daily wages of men and women (in money or in kind), stewards, stories told by those who worked at

¹ Footnote: Further information on Sean Ó Súilleabáin can be found in the *Handbook of Irish Folklore*. This text provides a comprehensive overview of the Famine, offering insights into its impact on local communities and the various coping mechanisms employed during this devastating period.
such schemes, hardships endured etc. Poorhouses during the Famine. Rent-collection, evictions, kindness of some individual landlords. Migration and movements of population during the Famine (e.g. in some places people went toward the sea-side where food was said to be more plentiful). Miracle-stories of the Famine: mermaid-cow supplied people near the Shannon with milk; stones put to boil become potatoes; food appears on a table mysteriously; chaff sown after distribution of seed among the needy produces good crop (story told to explain placename Ros an Chátha). Are there any local examples of such stories?

Proselytism
Write down accounts of attempts made locally to win over people as a whole or some of them from the Catholic faith. When were some activities most pronounced? Attitudes of the people and the clergy towards them. Were any Missions or colonies established locally for the purpose of proselytism? Details. Bible-schools: use to which they were put, attendance, teachers, programmes, success or failure. Activities of bible-readers. Distribution of tracts and bibles printed in Irish. Were there any centres set up locally for the distribution of soup or food among the people (soup kitchens)? Give their location. By what names were these centres called? Were they regarded as proselytising centres? Were people who refused to ‘turn’ sent away without food? Did some local people give up their faith? Temporarily or permanently? Were priests similarly involved? By what names were perverts known locally (soupers, jumpers, cait bhreaca, Albanaigh, Sasanaigh)? Songs, ballads and stories about persons who gave up their faith through proselytism.

Emigration
Did people emigrate from your district to other countries? When did this custom begin? What local causes were responsible for it? Did it continue over a period of years. To what countries did the local people emigrate..? Did whole families emigrate in former times? Accounts of this (details of free emigration, ‘coffin ships’, long hazardous voyages)...Did the local people assemble to bid the emigrant farewell. Give an account of this. By what name was such a gathering known locally? (e.g. American Wake)? From which ports did local emigrants leave? Details of the ships

1 Ó Súilleabháin, S., A Handbook of Irish Folklore, p. 534-8.
in which they sailed. Songs and ballads about emigrants. How did local people who emigrated usually get on?…

Local Evictions
Give an account of evictions which were carried out in your district at any time. When were evictions most frequent? Were some of the local landlords ill-disposed towards their tenants? Why were people evicted (refusal or inability to pay rent; refusal to vote as the landlord wished; refusal to marry as the landlord dictated; cutting of a tree or branch without landlord’s permission, or some other trivial cause; clearance of families to make way for richer tenants or for tree-planting etc.) Were people sometimes evicted for no apparent reason? Give as much detail as possible on these points. How were evictions carried out locally? Was notice given? When did they usually take place? Stories about ‘emergency men’, ‘grabbers’, bailiffs, and battering rams. Was force used to eject the people? How were women, children, and the sick and infirm treated? Was the fire quenched and the roof thrown down? What was done with people’s furniture and other possessions? Was their livestock taken in lieu of rent? Where did evicted families usually go? Did any of them return to their homes later? Did some go to the workhouse or emigrate? Was it customary for evicted families to settle down on waste ground or on a common? Did they build houses in these places by their own effort or with assistance from neighbours? Give a description of these “squatter houses.” By what names were they referred to?…. Stories about the following: evicted man becomes highway robber; curse of evicted family or widow falls on heads of evictors; houses haunted by ghosts of persons implicated in evictions.
Appendix Three

Sean Ó Súilleabháin’s instructions to collectors, in *A Handbook of Irish Folklore.*

1) Use your intelligence and initiative when collecting. Follow every clue.
2) Even very small or seemingly trivial items of information should be recorded.
3) Items which are commonplace in a district should be recorded as well as the more unusual ones. What is commonplace in one district may be unique or altogether unknown in another.
4) Record all kinds of information, even that which you have already recorded in other districts or from other informants. The more variants of an item recorded the better: what one variant lacks another may supply.
5) Negative answers to questions should be written down as well as positive ones.
6) Write down the information you obtain immediately, if possible. If that is not convenient, do so as soon as you can.
7) Record the information in the exact words of the speaker, if possible, make no ‘corrections’ or changes.
8) If the informant spoke in Irish, record the information in that language. Write it down in English if it was given in English.
9) Write as neatly and legibly as possible. All manuscripts are preserved.
10) Leave a margin about half an inch wide vacant at the proper side, so that when the manuscript is bound no portion of the writing is hidden from view.
11) The collector should state clearly (either on a slip affixed at the head of each item or else as a note at the end) the name, age and full address of the person from whom he recorded the information. It is most important that the source of each piece of information be given correctly.
12) The collector should also give any information he has which may help to throw additional light on what he has recorded. For example, if only families which are known to have settled in a district in comparatively recent times practice a particular custom, that fact should be stated.

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13) In describing an unusual implement, vessel, house, bog-find etc., a well drawn sketch, with measurements or a photograph would add greatly to the value of the account. Similarly, a map showing the position of a particular house, holy well, field monument or other object mentioned in the course of an account should, if possible, be given.

14) If a custom or belief mentioned in a collection is no longer observed, that fact should be stated. The approximate date of the decay of a custom or belief, should, if possible, be given.
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