

BOOK REVIEWS

Paddy's Lament: Ireland 1846-1847, Prelude to Hatred. Thomas Gallagher. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982, 345 pages, \$14.95 hard.

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The snarled roots of Northern Ireland's violence may resemble the fabled Gordian knot, but fierce sword strokes have not even begun to sever the tangle. Oddly, the complications are incomprehensible to most Americans, who demonstrate minimal understanding of the seemingly deranged behavior of the Ulster Irish and who view the conflict in simplistic religious terms: why cannot the Catholics and Protestants get along over there? That is akin to asking why Israelis and Palestinians cannot just shake hands and be done with it. Either a great deal of patient unravelling must be done, or the knot must be destroyed by violence of cataclysmic proportions: for its strands represent centuries of intertwined and knotted catastrophes.

No single volume can begin to satisfactorily explain the entire historical jumble; indeed, as library shelves attest, volumes have been written tracing the origin and development of what the British Empire once so quaintly regarded as "the Irish question." Consequently, a book such as Thomas Gallagher's *Paddy's Lament* serves a valuable purpose, in that it points to one thread of this historical tangle, the terrible famine of 1846-1847 in Ireland, and makes it comprehensible as an enduring cause of Irish hatred for, and mistrust of, the British. As Gallagher notes in his preface, this book "may bring the present conflict no closer to a sane, peaceful solution. But if the intense hatred that exists is to be confronted and dissipated, it had better be understood." Gallagher is adept at making a complex historical moment understandable, for two excellent reasons. First, his prose is both lucid and surprisingly neutral; whenever possible, in fact, he lets the words of the participants themselves—from peasants to politicians—carry the burden of the narrative. Rather than conjure up imaginary descriptions of starving children, for example, he quotes eyewitness accounts such as that of American philanthropist, Elihu Burritt, who wrote from Skibbereen of the "breathing skeletons" he saw everywhere: "Had their bones been divested of the skin that held them together, and been covered with a veil of thin muslin, they would not have been more visible, especially when one of them clung to the door, while a sister was urging it forward, it assumed an appearance which can have been seldom paralleled this side of the grave. The effort which made it cling to the door disclosed every joint in its frame, while the deepest lines of old age furrowed its face. The enduring of ninety years of sorrow seemed to chronicle its record of woe upon the poor child's countenance." Although the style is archaic, this is reportage made personal; it is made especially touching by Burritt's use of that personal pronoun *it*, for the hunger has reduced children to neutral creatures.

Consider one more contemporary account, this by S. Godolphin Osbourne: "If you take hold of the loose skin within the elbow and lift the arm by it, it comes away in a large thin fold, as though you had lifted one side of a long narrow bag, in which some loose bones had been placed; if you place the forefinger of your hand under the

chin, in the angle of the jaw bone, you find the whole base of the mouth, so to speak, so thin, that you could easily conceive it possible, with a very slight pressure, thus to force the tongue into the roof of the mouth ”

The second reason for Gallagher's success is that his vision is never limited by the tags that so often narrow a specialist's viewpoint. His is never the single point of view of the economist, political scientist, sociologist, psychologist, ethnologist, geographer, doctor, agriculturalist, folklorist, or anthropologist. Rather, it is all of these; he is remarkably skillful at associating disciplines, scrutinizing relationships, moving from effects to causes across many disciplines, and above all at keeping the individual in sharp focus against the vast background he reconstructs. Indeed, at times he creates a sense of the individual human being's struggle within the large web of historical panorama.

Gallagher contends in *Paddy's Lament* that the great famine of 1846-1847 is of overriding importance because it marks the transformation into bitter, undying hatred of three centuries of hostility toward the English. As Gallagher demonstrates, the famine throws into high relief the callous, ignorant, and stupid manner in which England so often administered Irish affairs. The Irish famine highlights the dark underside of the magnificent British Empire: all that was ugly and vicious: the racial hatreds, cultural bigotry, and religious prejudice: above all, the unbridled greed of the privileged which made them regard the Irish peasant as little more than a meal ticket, at best as a quaint aborigine who was about as likely to have a soul as his farm animals, who, indeed, probably deserved to starve to death because, as the *London Times* very carefully pointed out, he was naturally lazy, “too callous to feel, or too supine to mend” his abject poverty. Thus do institutions shift blame to justify the very conditions they have created, thus do they justify legal theft and murder, for as Gallagher's book demonstrates, the great famine was surely the murder of a large portion of one nation's population by the general consent of the government of another—even if this consent was most often implied and unvoiced, even if the murderous conditions were as often the result of passivity of action.

The great famine has been studied before, certainly. Cecil Woodham-Smith had a best seller of sorts with *The Great Hunger* in the early sixties. Woodham-Smith's book is a large and convincing work, but her admirable “historian's” point of view nevertheless serves ultimately to diminish the horror of the disaster. Gallagher differs decidedly from Woodham-Smith in this way: he presents the famine chiefly from the point of view of its primary victim, the Irish peasant farmer. Thus while Woodham-Smith's book persuaded on the intellectual level, Gallagher's ultimately persuades the heart—though his arguments are certainly reasoned enough to persuade the head as well. Both books convince the reader; Gallagher's book *moves* the reader. While he examines dispassionately the political and agricultural causes, and although he points out the fervor with which the British embraced *laissez-faire* economics, Gallagher never lets the reader forget that finally the famine was a disaster to be measured and to be felt in human terms. Politics, economics, agricultural theory, medicine, these are backdrops: the individual life is the constant foreground.

Gallagher makes the hatred some Irish still have for the English quite understandable; in fact, one wonders—after reading his book's first chapter—at the humane nature of the Irish people, who have been willing to forgive much. The starvation and forced emigration of a vast portion of Ireland's population invariably invites comparison with the Holocaust of World War Two. The Irish were not exterminated as deliberately as were the Jews, but their extermination was in many ways as insidious. It certainly proved easy enough for the 19th century British to pretend that the forces of death were beyond their control, as easy as it was to follow orders in Nazi Germany.

Those who find this comparison harsh should first read Gallagher's book, which depends to a great extent upon British historical documents. Consider the racial and cultural attitude inherent in this passage from a London *Times* editorial Gallagher quotes: "They are going! They are going! The Irish are going with a vengeance! Soon a Celt will be as rare on the banks of the Liffey as a red man on the banks of the Manhattan [Hudson]. Law has ridden through Ireland; it has taugh with bayonets and interpreted with ruin. Townships levelled with the ground, stragging columns of exiles, workhouses multiplied, and still crowded, express the determination of the legislature to rescue Ireland from its slovenly old barbarism, and to plant there the institutions of this more civilised land." Thus could a civilized race gleefully celebrate the death and emigration of at least one and one-half million "barbaric," inferior people; thus could civilized men celebrate the destruction of "slovenly" human beings and their replacement with "institutions."

Paddy's Lament is divided into four major sections. "The Doomed Country" details the causes and the graphic effects of the famine. Gallagher explains how the great famine was precipitated by the potato blight, duly describes the blight and its causes, and more to the point he explains how the potato—and one particular potato, the lumper, in fact—became the main staple for millions of Irish farmers at a time when Ireland was producing enough grain and meat to feed its people six times over. He accounts for the incredible fact that whole generations of the poorer farming families passed without once tasting meat. Gallagher convincingly delineates those aspects of their cultural heritage which made it tremendously difficult for these "uncivilized" peasants to steal, even while facing death by starvation.

The famine, Gallagher makes clear, was the result of numerous causes—some closely linked, some not—but the chief causes were economic. As word of the disastrous proportions of the famine spread around the world, efforts at relief were made—especially in the United States. Ironically, while British ships were transporting Irish food from the harbours of a starving Ireland to England, they were also making it difficult for relief ships to bring food into these very same ports. In fact, no matter what country sent relief, food could only enter Ireland in British ships. Odd as it seems—since the Irish were British subjects and had been paying taxes as British subjects since the union of 1800—relief food had to be unloaded in British ports, transferred to British ships, then taxed before it could be sent on to Ireland. The motive for this bizarre behavior was that there would be "no interference with the natural course of trade." To her credit, the United States (as well as other countries) eventually ignored these inane laws and sailed food directly to Irish harbours to be unloaded.

"The Doomed Country" illustrates what can happen when the stability of an impersonal system—economic in this case—becomes more important than individual life, even individual life in very large numbers. Indeed, as death flourished, so did the system that caused it. The Poor Relief Bill, posing as aid to the starving, actually was designed to make certain Irish farmers emigrate, thus helping English landlords to consolidate holdings, to complete the transformation of Ireland from a pastoral to an agricultural country. To receive food, the starving farmer was forced to surrender any landholdings above a quarter of an acre in size. Not only English landowners but English bureaucrats prospered from the famine. Commissions multiplied, and considerable money was spent on paperwork: reports of commissioners inquiring into matters connected with the potato crop, reports of select committees of the House of Lords on laws relating to the relief of the Irish poor, reports from the commissioners on public works, the Devon Commission, emigration commissioners; more work was created for commissions than for the desperate poor, it seemed. All profited

except the dying Irish, for by all calculations, more money was spent administering relief than was spent on the relief itself. Although Gallagher never explicitly makes the point, the horrible slow deaths by starvation during the famine were as attributable to a burgeoning bureaucracy as to the failure of the potato crop: a bureaucracy which was clearly a grotesque forecast of the 20th century democracies besieged by the greedy and the self-serving.

"Escape," the book's second section, investigates the gradual and unavoidable conclusion that numerous Irish reached: the only available alternatives were death and emigration. Emigration was tremendously difficult for a people who were bound by tradition to one village and one parish, people for whom "travel" was a journey to the next parish. Indeed, the seriousness of the decision to emigrate is indicated by the ritual before departure: the celebrated "American wake" by the family and friends of the emigrants. In the mind of the peasant, the voyage across the ocean was, perhaps, a less distressing "death" than starvation, but it was a species of death nonetheless. Certainly in the vast majority of cases it was as all knew it would be: the loved ones who emigrated were never seen again by their families in Ireland.

"The Voyage," section three, explores the wretched conditions aboard emigration ships, conditions created—as so much of the famine-related suffering was created—by the profit motive. The Irish were packed into ships as tightly as were Africans at the height of the slave trade. Indeed, the British government "did more to eliminate the inhumanity of the African slave trade than was ever done to alleviate the suffering of the Irish . . ." Much of the suffering and illness sprang from the British practice of building temporary decks in their ships to hasten Irish emigration and, at the same time, to make it maximally profitable. Not only were too many people crowded together, but filth and disease were virtually guaranteed because while permanent decks could be regularly hosed down with lime and water to keep them relatively clean, temporary decks could not. Temporary decks were not caulked, and water from any hosing down would damage cargo which was stored in the "orlop deck" just below the temporary emigrants' deck. Naturally, hosing was forbidden, filth accumulated, disease spread, passengers died: but precious cargo was protected.

Widespread death was horrible enough, but death at sea was even more horrible to the Irish—it was spiritually damaging. First, burial in consecrated ground was impossible. Second, most Irish superstitions linked to death were land-related. For example, the last person buried on a given day was required to perform menial duties for the graveyard's dead until the next time someone was buried last on a multiburial day. Families would occasionally race with a body to the graveyard so their loved one could be spared "last-buried" status and its accompanying duties. Such superstitions were a psychological defense against death—as was burial in consecrated ground—and burial at sea negated these defenses. Gallagher makes it clear that burial at sea was spiritually alien, that the British were not only killing the Irish, but by circumventing their traditions, they were making them particularly vulnerable—as well as particularly fertile for seeds of hatred.

The final section, "Through the Golden Door," examines the odd mixture of fulfilled expectation and betrayal that awaited the Irish emigrants in New York; the plight of victims ripe for exploitation was often balanced by the opportunity that was inarguably available. Gallagher deftly explores the irony of a bigotry that sprung up in self-defense within Irish communities and neighborhoods, partly, at least, because of a need to belong—substituting for the "homogeneity of life in Ireland" which was gone forever—a sad but explicable reaction alive in South Boston today.

In fact, in spite of the evocation of suffering, the detailing of gruesome deaths, the description of painful mass emigration, the depiction of spiritual and material loss,

Gallagher does not adequately measure the depth of the Irish loss during the famine. Not only did the population, through death, emigration, and a declining birth rate, decrease by about half, but an ancient way of life was at last doomed to complete destruction. The most obvious indicator of this sudden disappearance of an ancient way of life was the abrupt and disastrous decline in the number of Irish-Gaelic speakers. Clearly the widespread physical death was matched by a spiritual death, a sense of hopelessness that obliterated a viable culture. Traces of the old Gaelic way of life survive in Ireland today, but the years between 1846 and the Irish revival of the late 1880's were more destructive to the old Gaelic way of life and to the language than hundreds of years of foreign influence and domination had been.

Liam O'Flaherty, the great Irish writer, turned this same famine into a novel, and a measure of the famine's impact upon the Irish nation is contained in the oft-quoted remark that O'Flaherty's *Famine* should be regarded as Ireland's national epic, for it truly illuminates the darkest and most important moment in the nation's consciousness; it captures the spirit of a people at the very moment its soul is extinguished and, in slightly but eternally altered form, rekindled.

Paddy's Lament is a valuable book. It is valuable in that it shows how an impersonal system can grind human life to pulp. It was not, after all, the British people who callously orchestrated the near-destruction of an entire country. Rather, it was a people's devotion to a system and the virtually irreversible momentum that a bureaucracy obtained and maintained. Certainly there was anti-Irish prejudice among the British. It remains today. Hitchhiking on the Dingle peninsula a few years ago I was treated to a ride and a gloriously absurd lecture by a wealthy English solicitor vacationing in the west of Ireland. He warned me against the unhygienic practices of the Irish, their sloth, their unreliability, their practice of truth-stretching and misrepresentation, their very lack of manners, of civilization. I was more amused than angered, but I know, too, that his like were pillars of the system that starved a nation in 1846-1847.

Thomas Gallagher does a superb job of helping the readers of his book understand, even sympathize with, the virulent hatred some Irish feel for the British today—a hatred that fans the flames of Northern Ireland's violence. Understanding is valuable, and it is time historians and behavioral scientists joined forces in serious efforts to understand ancient hatreds: those of victimizer and victim as well. The British solicitor who lectured me on the inferiority of the Irish may be less sympathetic than the wronged descendants of the Irish peasant; yet, if we could get to the roots of the anti-Irish bias in England perhaps that sympathy would shift, at least a bit. Certainly the British exhibit prejudices toward "inferior" races as strongly and blindly as any American Ku Klux Klanner. What is to be gained from dismissing the Ku Klux Klanner, the Nazi, the British Imperialist, as merely human aberrations to be condemned out of hand? Indeed, American enthusiasm at the Queen's visit would suggest that the Empire might find enough Anglophiles to flourish in the new world. Surely there is a desperate need for books such as this, which help us comprehend ancient hatreds and which remind us of the atrocities that can be committed in the name of civilization, law, business, God, even love. Perhaps we have a deeper need for companion volumes as well: volumes which explore and develop "sympathy for the devil"—as, for example, one might explore the anti-Irish sentiments of the British as sympathetically as possible. At any rate, a book such as *Paddy's Lament* provides a solid point of departure for a brave plunge into the sea of human hatreds that humankind may—in the interests of survival—have to take with increasing frequency.

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