

## ILHS BOOK REVIEW

### *Dublin & the Great Irish Famine*

(A collection of 13 essays edited by Emily Mark-Fitzgerald, Ciarán McCabe & Ciarán Reilly, UCD Press – 196 pages)

Review by Dónal Denham

The clue to this esteemed collection is in its title. It is an axiom that Dublin is almost always found to be in contrast with the rest of the country; this also applies to the “Great Irish Famine” – somehow, *Great* and *Famine* jar on paper but, perhaps, I am being pedantic. The overall conclusion that may be drawn from the contributions is that while the Famine inevitably impacted on normal lifestyles and society in Dublin, the result was less severe in many respects than outside the Pale.

As such, it is an instructive collection, delving in depth into a myriad of areas of activity which are deserving of our attention but not always noticed. Of course, some of the papers are of more immediate interest and relevance to the Famine historiography than others, and a certain subjectivity in curiosity on the part of the reader is unavoidable. That said, while the back cover of the book claims that it is appealing to the general reader, I believe that it is actually aimed at fellow researchers, students, and scholars alike. Likewise, many of the authors are mutually reinforcing in their theses and conclusions, to the detriment of any stimulating diversity of debate.

Helpfully, the book is well-structured, compartmentalized into sections dealing with industry and commerce, charitable efforts, social issues such as healthcare and mortality as well as a slightly strange section about the Famine in cultural history which does not immediately spring to mind. In that context, *Dublin Fictions & the Economics of Famine Memory* by Christopher Cusack is a case in point, a challenge for the general reader.

Essays on the nascent Irish banking industry by Declan Curran, with special attention to the emergence of the Bank of Ireland as a dominant force during this period (and, one is tempted to add, prescient in retrospect) is informative and “Taming the Channel; technology, liberalism and the Irish Sea” is both esoteric and engaging. Likewise, the explanation and description of the Dublin Mendicity Association (aka the legendary “Mendicity Institute”, Dublin’s oldest charitable institution, founded in 1818 and still functioning from its original base at Usher’s Island, and, moreover, one of the iconic locations of 1916, is a credit to author, Ciarán McCabe.

Less satisfactory, surprisingly since he is an eminent authority on the subject, is the piece by Rob Goodbody on the Quaker contribution to the Dublin of the era. A bit muddled, his description lacks the impact which I believe was more significant than he consents to show – a case of Society of Friends modesty? For instance, no mention, even in passing, is made of the contribution of James Hack Tuke, a Quaker from York who toured Ireland early on in the Famine and made both recommendations and practical efforts to alleviate the suffering in rural areas. Achill Island has a plaque commemorating him for his works. The Tukes of York were a prominent Quaker family that married into Irish quaker society.

The book is well edited by the three principal contributors. But some 40 of the 196 pages are given over to footnotes, a trifle over the top? And I am not convinced that all of the 27

illustrations, while leavening the academic content, earn their place. A more direct link to the texts they purport to illuminate would have been helpful.

In any event, this is an impressively academic tome, ranging across the spectrum of economic, social, and cultural aspects of Dublin life in the mid 1800s and placing Dublin in a firmly subsidiary if not entirely tangential role in the Irish Famine context.

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