

Sunk in the Mainstream: Irish Women Writers, Canonicity, and Famine Memory, 1892-1917

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“Where is the Famine in the literature of the Revival?”
—Terry Eagleton (1995, 13)

“A girl did not dare to be original in 1846.”
—L.T. Meade (1909, 2)

I.

It feels curiously anachronistic, thirty years after Chris Morash’s *The Hungry Voice* (1989), to begin an essay about the literature of the Great Irish Famine by adverting to Terry Eagleton’s oft-cited reflections on the representation of the crisis in Irish writing. However, his observations perfectly frame the argument this essay will develop regarding the relation between canon, gender, and memory. In *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger*, his influential contribution to the 1990s postrevisionist movement in Irish Studies, Eagleton argues that “repression or evasion would seem to be at work in Irish literary culture, which is hardly rife with allusions to the event” (1995, 12). He is asking an important question, but while he partly qualifies his argument by focusing on the canon, the notion that the Famine is absent from the oeuvres of the great white males whose faces adorn the famous Irish Writers souvenir poster is itself doubtful (see Cusack and Goss 2006). More importantly, though, Eagleton’s argument is problematic in general. As this essay will argue by considering examples of Famine fiction published by Irishwomen between 1892 and 1916, processes of canonisation, and particularly its gendered dynamics, have significantly influenced the cultural memory of the Famine.

Eagleton was certainly aware of the existence of a body of Famine literature, as demonstrated by his references to Chris Morash’s studies on the subject, but he argues that the memory of the Famine is mainly hidden in the margins of canonical texts such as Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* (1847). However, this suggestion has been strongly qualified by scholars such as Morash (1989 and 1995), Margaret Kelleher (1997), Melissa Fegan (2002), and most recently Marguérite Corporaal (2017), as well as doctoral research by Lindsay Janssen (2016) and myself (2018). Such work shows that there are at least 130 examples of literary fiction from pre-Independence Ireland and the diaspora that engage very explicitly with the

Famine past. Such texts, many of which were once widely read and in that sense not simply “minor,” demonstrate that it is incorrect to argue that silence has been the primary modality of the memory of the event. This is indeed confirmed by the many hundreds of references to the crisis in newspapers and magazines down the decades, and by the prevalence of Famine narratives in the National Folklore Collection.

Yet the myth of silence continues to have mainstream traction, as Mary McAleese’s preface to the monumental *Atlas of the Great Irish Famine* shows. The former President states that:

Writing about and representing the Great Irish Famine, the most tragic event in Irish history[,] has not been straightforward. For many years the event was cloaked in silence, its memory for the most part buried or neglected. (McAleese 2012, ix)

McAleese’s gambit, with its emphatic sense of pathos, prioritises its rhetorical purpose over accuracy. After all, in the same volume, Chris Morash, summarising two decades of scholarship, observes that “the old cliché that the Famine was a silence in Irish writing is not really sustainable” (Morash 2012, 644).

The trope of silence itself, rather than any actual lack of textual mediations of Famine memory, is a major reason why this view persists. A common critical strategy is to emphasise what is, purportedly, the Famine’s traumatic unrepresentability, and then to describe the event in detail. The proliferation of this rhetorical posture in turn has given shape to the dominant narrative of the Famine on a meta-discursive level, particularly in the context of the preoccupations of the Revival, even if it inevitably disproves itself by its own example (see part II below, as well as Cusack 2018, 20-21, 45-52).

This strategy is, however, not the only causative factor in the aetiology of silence, as Eagleton’s focus on the canon unwittingly establishes. As Margaret Kelleher states, a major cause of the belief that the Famine has not really been represented is that “[t]he extent to which Irish literature contains references to the famine depends, very simply, on where one looks” (Kelleher 1997, 4). While there are few texts now considered canonical from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century that have a central focus on the Famine, there is a large trove of pre-Independence Famine writing, especially fiction, that was banished to the cultural hinterlands in the wake of the Irish Revival. Even if once highly popular, authors such as Patrick Sheehan, Justin McCarthy, and Joseph Guinan, in whose works the Famine

features at length, have not become canonical, unlike contemporaries such as Stoker, Wilde, Yeats, and Synge (see also Murphy 1997).

An exploration of canon formation also brings into focus another dimension. As I argue in this essay, one of the reasons why the myth of Famine silence became so forceful is the silencing of women’s voices in the Irish canon. Some of the most popular Irish writers from the latter decade of the nineteenth century and first two decades of the twentieth, such as L.T. Meade (1844-1914), Jane Barlow (1857-1917), Katharine Tynan (1859-1931), and Emily Lawless (1845-1913), engaged deeply with the memory of the Famine, as did less famous authors such as Mildred Darby (1867-1932), Louise Field (1856-1940), Máire Ní Chillín (1874-1956), and the pseudonymous “Slieve Foy,” in addition to diasporic authors such as the Irish-American Mary Synon (dates unknown) (Cusack 2018). None of these authors remain widely read today.

In her contribution to *A History of Modern Irish Women’s Literature*, Paige Reynolds shows how Irish Revivalism contributed in no small degree to reducing the visibility of women in Irish society and culture beyond predominantly symbolical iterations of femininity as “the vulnerable virgin and self-abnegating mother” (Reynolds 2018, 131). Such tropes were part of binaries that encouraged images of Irishness rooted in masculinity and virility, which were meant to prove Ireland’s fitness for self-government (see Beatty 2016). Despite the numerous Irish women writers who critiqued such patriarchal dualism, Irish womanhood became both religiously and culturally increasingly formalised as a highly idealised – and thus inherently reductive – iteration of domestic femininity at the service of an emergent sense of masculine nationhood.

As James H. Murphy points out, literary production during this era showed near “parity” in terms of authors’ genders (Murphy 2011, 17). Indeed, Stephen Gwynn, an important advocate of Irish Revivalism during the fin-de-siècle, remarked in 1897 that “[t]he roll of Irish novelists is more than half made up of women’s names,” highlighting Emily Lawless and Jane Barlow, both writing about the Famine at the time, as the two exemplars “who stand out prominently among contemporary writers of Irish fiction” (Gwynn 1897, 16, 21). But as literature was considered the pre-eminent vehicle for new ideals of Irishness, the Irish canon grew ever more androcentric, particularly as some of the major writers of the Revival in turn became the bedrock of post-Independence self-imaginings. For the apotheosis of every Synge or Yeats, it seems, a Lawless or Barlow had to be consigned to

oblivion, and their versions of the Irish past, including their examinations of Famine memory, erased.

The process of canon formation is obviously not a zero-sum game, but in the context of the Famine it is notable that several women writers from this era who wrote about it, such as L.T. Meade and Katharine Tynan, had greater fame than most of the men doing so, and were indeed among the bestselling Irish writers of their day. Moreover, many, including Tynan and Jane Barlow, were part of the same *côteries* as male contemporaries who are now more famous. Despite this, they are no longer known outside the specialist repertoire. By and large, the authors from this period who still garner attention beyond academic contexts are male.

Given the number of Irish women who wrote fiction about the Famine around the fin-de-siècle and indeed the fame some of them enjoyed, it would appear that the consolidation of the persistent Famine narrative about traumatic repression is at least partially inflected by the gender dynamics of canon formation. Gendered processes of sociocultural consecration and marginalisation have in this sense deeply influenced the creation and proliferation of narratives of Irish cultural forgetting, all in the service of new and proudly resistant narratives of nationhood. By this token, Famine memory is not typified primarily by silence, but rather by a lack of visibility that is culturally engineered.

II.

However, Terry Eagleton’s argument about the apparent absence of the Famine in Irish literary culture is premised on the notion that the Revival was, as Kevin Whelan suggests, “the creation of a series of radical responses to the Famine legacy” (Whelan 2005, 137). Scholars such as Whelan, Eagleton, and Seamus Deane conceptualise the Famine as a cultural trauma that was repressed to enhance the viability of the Irish nation-building project (Whelan 2005; Deane 1997, 51).

Numerous texts from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century indeed seem to suggest that the memory of the Famine was the subject of cultural forgetting. In his 1908 tract *The Famine Years*, Canon Joseph Guinan states that “the bitter memories” of the crisis “are now well nigh forgotten” (Guinan 1908, 32). In the preface to *The Hunger* (1910), Mildred Darby claims that “[f]ew people of the present generation know more of the appalling catastrophe than its broad outlines, gathered from some attenuated volume of Irish History; and those very outlines have probably grown vague” (Merry 1910, 1). In her biography of

temperance reformer Father Theobald Mathew, Katharine Tynan describes the crisis as “a holocaust of a million dead of starvation” during which things happened “too horrible to be told” (Tynan 1908, 144, 150).

Further examples abound, but what is interesting here is that Guinan, Darby, and Tynan, and indeed numerous others who advocate such theories about the attrition of Famine memory, contradict their own assertions. Guinan states that “there is no use now in indulging in bitter reflections” (Guinan 1908, 4), but then spends another thirty pages doing exactly that. Darby remarks that the Famine is “unforgettable” and “burnt by personal suffering upon the memory” (Merry 1910, 3). And Tynan’s chapter on things “too horrible to be told” covers a full fourteen pages. These works, like so many other examples of Famine literature, are typical examples of apophasis. This discursive emphasis on silence is actually a highly conventional manifestation of Famine memory and a marker of its propagation rather than elision or sublimation. It provides an idiom and range of imagery for the description of the Famine that validates its epistemological conceptualisation as the ground zero of Irish culture.

Post-Famine silence is frequently, though not exclusively, coded as feminine, by male and female authors alike. Famine narratives often feature upper(-middle) class female characters who use the crisis to chip away at the strictures of their social position, as in L.T. Meade’s *The Stormy Petrel* (1909), but it can also mute female protagonists. Such stories allegorise the death of Irish culture through the familiar representation of Ireland as a young woman. For instance, the protagonist of Emily Lawless’ short story “After the Famine” (1898), Eleanor D’Arcy, is an impoverished gentry daughter who is severely traumatised by the death of her father and sisters as a result of their charitable efforts. She is objectified as a largely voiceless victim whose only utterances are either faltering descriptions of the way her loved ones died, or exclamations directed at the dead. Eileen Fitzmaurice, the protagonist of Jane Barlow’s story “The Keys of the Chest” (1897), is very similar in terms of age and class, but she is literally silenced by the Famine, as she accidentally dies in an explosion ordered by an officer of the Public Works to destroy a large rock that is the focus of Eileen’s childhood fancies. In these texts, as in many other works, the death of culture and the traumatic silence it engenders is imagined as feminine.

In *Forgetful Remembrance*, Guy Beiner demonstrates how cultural amnesia is usually fraught with contradiction. His study of the memory of 1798 in Ulster highlights how “disremembering”, an ostensibly negative manifestation of memory usually rooted in social

tensions in many ways actually cements the legacy of the history it is trying to repress (Beiner 2018). The memory of the Famine is a major example of this: the emphasis on silence and trauma is in fact a performative strategy which results in the consolidation and distribution of a particular type of narrative about Ireland’s past. While the idea that the Famine was so traumatic that it muted an entire culture may have been a validating strategy for the Revivalist project, as a cultural index it is recursive and misleading.

III.

It is mostly their shared theme and the vagaries of canon formation that bring together works like Jane Barlow’s *Kerrigan’s Quality* (1894) and “The Keys of the Chest” (1897), Louise Field’s *Denis* (1896), L.T. Meade’s *The Stormy Petrel* (1909), Mildred Darby’s *The Hunger* (1910), and assorted short stories by Katharine Tynan, Emily Lawless, and others (for a full overview, see Cusack 2018). These texts do not constitute a subset within the larger domain of Famine fiction other than by virtue of their authors’ gender. Nor are they, with the exception of Meade’s novel (Cusack 2019), more explicitly gendered in the way they engage with the memory of the crisis than some Famine fiction by male writers, such as Anthony Trollope’s *Castle Richmond* (1860) or Justin McCarthy’s *Mononia* (1901). And while most of these women writers came from broadly similar class backgrounds in the upper-middle or upper classes, their political and religious backgrounds and views are by no means identical.

These works resemble other Famine fiction in the repertoire of images and representational strategies they employ. Like the vast majority of Famine fiction from the 1850s onwards, many instrumentalise the memory of the crisis to make points about other social, political, or cultural issues, using the Famine as a “blank canvas on which to explore their own anxieties” (Fegan 2002, 209). Louise Field’s novel *Denis*, for example, is set during the crisis but harnesses its associations to address “that vast and ever-recurring problem, the Irish Question” still defining Irish society at the end of the nineteenth century (Field 1896, [v]), particularly in terms of class (Cusack 2019). Jane Barlow’s *Kerrigan’s Quality* (1894) too appropriates the memory of the crisis to discuss the position of the upper classes in fin-de-siècle Ireland. And Máire Ní Chillín’s obscure tale “On the Bog Road” (1917), published in the M.H. Gill collection *On Tiptoe: A Collection of Stories and Sketches by Irish Women*, reduces the Famine to a moral lesson for children about faith and fortitude during the First World War. All of these authors use the Famine as a cipher, a vessel for a myriad concerns not directly related to the event itself.

In the context of this essay, L.T. Meade’s *The Stormy Petrel* (1909) is thematically perhaps the most interesting text. Meade was a hugely prolific and popular author who published scores of modern tales about female agency. As suggested by the second epigraph to this chapter, “[a] girl did not dare to be original in 1846” (Meade 1909, 2), in *The Stormy Petrel* Meade uses the Famine past to introduce a powerful female protagonist who embraces philanthropy as a means of increasing her autonomy, though the novel soon becomes mired in a convoluted romantic plot. Meade’s feminist interest in the Famine demonstrates that she was familiar with the most regular type of protagonist of Irish Famine fiction, namely the charitable young lady of upper-middle or upper class background who uses philanthropy for self-assertion, found throughout the entire corpus of pre-Independence Famine fiction (see Kelleher 1997 and Cusack 2019). Though Meade is surely, given her explicitly feminist rhetoric, a modern writer, her ostensibly radical protagonist is actually not that “original” within the context of Famine literature.

As a bestselling author, Meade had a good sense of her market, so her choice to devote an entire novel to the Famine is significant. Like numerous other Famine novels, *The Stormy Petrel*, published a few years before Meade’s death in 1914, was reviewed in leading literary periodicals, including *The Academy*, which concluded slightly cattily that Meade’s fans “will find that she has given good measure, and that the quality of interest which she invariably manages to impart to her books remains, despite many verbal infelicities, at its usual high level” (“Review” 1909). Yet in her essential study *The Irish New Woman*, Tina O’Toole claims that “we find no traces of it [the Famine] in her later writing, which perhaps suggests an unwillingness to engage with the fractured history of her homeland” (O’Toole 2013, 46). The fact that O’Toole, the most prominent critic of Irish New Woman writing today, overlooked this novel, and thus a very prominent manifestation of Famine memory, betrays the extent to which the literary memory of the Famine is defined by the myth of absence.

Meade and others wrote a type of Irish realist fiction that was rejected by (self-proclaimed) arbiters of Revivalist taste such as W.B. Yeats and Stephen Gwynn, and Maurice Egan in the US. While acknowledging its influence, they considered it too focused on marketing particular versions of Irish life, often to non-Irish audiences, to the detriment of literary and cultural value. “Literature [...] in Ireland,” Gwynn remarked in 1897, “is almost inextricably connected with considerations foreign to art” (Gwynn 1897, 8). In his view, the vast majority of nineteenth-century Irish fiction straddles narrative fiction and journalism, which affects its aesthetic value, yet it rarely manages to represent what he considers to be

the quintessence of Irishness, since such novels often reduce Irishness to particular generalities.

Other critics from this era also asserted that the programmatic literary reappraisal promoted by the Revival would fix “the factors that had restricted the quality of Irish writing – its overly sociological, poorly literary and market-driven character” (Kelleher 2005, 195). In order to achieve a higher degree of authenticity, and thus realism, Gwynn believed authors should focus on the specificities of different iterations – social, geographical, cultural – of Irish identity and resist the temptation to present the Irish as a completely homogeneous and pathologically joyous people. Importantly, as examples of this approach, he discusses Jane Barlow, whose tales produce finely-grained representations of Irishness through careful explorations of discrete regional identities, and Lawless, who largely rejects the type of blatant stereotyping that sold particularly well outside Ireland in order to develop more nuanced depictions of Irishness (Gwynn 1897, 21-3).

Yet though Gwynn considered these two authors especially praiseworthy, their reputations did not endure. Indeed, around the same time Yeats dismissed Barlow precisely for the qualities for which Gwynn commends her: “despite her genius for recording the externals of Irish peasant life, I do not feel that she has got deep into the heart of things” (Yeats 1895). Given that Revival-era women writers in particular were often dismissed for these putative transgressions and that most works of Famine fiction discussed in this essay match these criteria, it is highly probable that these ostensibly aesthetic considerations also masked restrictive gender norms, which thus helped shape the canon that propped up new constructions of Irish history and identity.

These processes also affected the reputations of earlier writers of Famine fiction. An important case in point is Annie Keary, whose Famine novel *Castle Daly* (1871) is promoted by Rosa Mulholland as “[t]he best Irish story written in later years” in her influential essay “Wanted an Irish Novelist” (R.M. 1891, 371). Neither Keary nor Mulholland, who also wrote about famine, remain well-known today, and accordingly their tales of Irish history too no longer find any audience outside academic contexts.

All of these examples are instructive: not only does their success demonstrate that these Irish women writers were much more popular than their current reputations suggest, but the fact that so many bestselling writers wrote successful fiction about the Famine emphatically gives the lie to the idea that the memory of the crisis was marked by a wholesale

cultural silence. On the contrary, the Great Famine was a theme that sold, yet as their writers were lost from view, so did some of the concerns they addressed in their works.

IV.

But what is ultimately at stake here? Do we lose anything at all if these texts are no longer read today? Though it would be possible to make a case for the literary quality of some of the texts referenced in this essay, this certainly does not apply to all of these works. The longueurs of L.T. Meade’s boilerplate romance or the filiopietistic orthodoxies of Máire Ní Chillín’s Famine tale ensure that these texts were unlikely candidates for canonisation anyway, even if in terms of sales the literary marketplace is seldom defined primarily by such concerns. But this is not intended as a belated sally in the canon wars that were infamously fought over the *Field Day Anthology* in the 1990s and is not, per se, a form of “retrieval work” (Kelleher 2003, 87), even if that white whale or holy grail of Irish Victorianists, an Irish *Middlemarch*, might yet be hiding among a bevy of its lesser brethren.

From the 1990s onwards, historians have been labouring to reconsider the position of women in the Irish revolutionary movement and cultural revival (Pašeta 2013, 1-16; Toole, McIntosh, and O’Cinnéide 2016, 1-9). Such work stresses the importance of querying traditional narratives, as these often foreground exclusionary perspectives. As Heather Laird argues, “[a]n historical framework that decentres familiar notions of power and the political and, consequently, expands the category of the historically relevant would automatically produce a body of scholarship more attuned to that which is at the margins of conventional history writing” (Laird 2018, 18). Renewed attention to neglected sources or engagements with familiar material that highlight themes such as gender, sexuality, and class will enable us to demythologise narratives about the Irish past premised on zero-sum conceptions of victimhood and cultural trauma. Instead, we will be able to promote more diverse and balanced interpretations of the history of Ireland and its diaspora.

Literary history has a major role to play in such processes. In *Scholars and Rebels*, Terry Eagleton argues that Irish fiction from the nineteenth century should be considered “an ersatz form of sociology” (Eagleton 1999, 32). This, in fact, dovetails with some of the criticisms directed at Irish authors by Gwynn, Yeats, and others, but is actually a major argument for returning to them today. Often, canonical fiction, which only rarely started life as popular fiction, is not necessarily the best place to look for the deposit of a society’s ideologies, mentalities, and mnemonic preoccupations (see Foster 2008, 1-24). Instead of

seeking to revise the canon in order to reclaim lost literary luminaries, I suggest we reframe the way we think about the uses of literature and the process of canon formation, and consider the implications this may have for our conceptualisation of Irish history. What is the upshot if the notion of canonicity, with all that entails, is used as a normative heuristic category for the study of the Irish past?

In a sense, the case of Mildred Darby can figure as a metaphor for the way the cultural reinvention of Ireland resulted in the deletion of many women writers from the Irish literary canon and, consequently, the neglect of the issues they wrote about. In Darby’s case, this silencing would be literal, and was in fact a direct result of the cruelties of patriarchy. While she used the male pseudonym Andrew Merry, reviews of *The Hunger* (1910) show that many people were privy to the author’s background – indeed, the *Irish Book Lover* of May 1910 named her outright (“Gossip” 1910). Following the publication of *The Hunger*, her husband Jonathon forbade her from publishing any further works. He felt that the novel, a *roman à clef* about the history of the Darby family, their estate, and their ancestral home, Leap Castle in Coolderry, Co. Offaly, had damaged his reputation (see Reilly 2018).

Though no longer permitted to publish, Darby by no means stopped writing. Over the next decade or so, she accrued a collection of manuscripts and drafts of stories, novels, and non-fiction, often focusing on local history and the Irish past more generally. But during the night of 30 July 1922, a party of anti-Treaty IRA fighters set fire to Leap Castle, one of many such acts of arson during the Civil War. In the conflagration all of her unpublished work was lost. Thus, though first suppressed by Jonathon’s assertion of patriarchal might, her voice, once a strong vehicle for the Irish past, was now silenced permanently by the forces, ironically, of that very history.

The marginalisation of authors of Famine fiction, and particularly the neglect of female authors who wrote at length about the crisis and were often widely read, influences how we remember and conceptualise Ireland’s history. Thus, in order to obtain a more diversified overview of this past, we must also assess and historicise the processes of inclusion and marginalisation that define which source material, and by extension which story, is granted visibility.

Sara Ahmed’s *Living a Feminist Life* discusses the many ways a “citational practice” that excludes women’s voices affects academic development and skews historical understanding (Ahmed 2017). Actively including marginalised voices is not only important for the promotion of diversity as a goal in itself, but is in fact crucial for the epistemological

authority of historiography. In the context of the Famine, too, such critical reappraisal of scholarly practices has considerable implications. “Methodological and theoretical renewal [...]” David Lloyd argues, “finds its value in serving the purposes of a recollection whose meaning and value lies in giving to the past’s untimely dead a memory that defies the repetition of their fate” (Lloyd 2014, 295). The project of reframing the story of the Famine to actively incorporate the voices of Mildred Darby, L.T. Meade, Emily Lawless, Jane Barlow, Katharine Tynan, Louise Field, and so many other women writers, thus harbours not just an academic but also an ethical imperative.

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