Caroline Foley

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Irish History

Famine Essay

The name Finn McCool is known by every man, woman, and child throughout the nation of Ireland. The stories of this hero and his antics are the stuff of legends, retold to future generations since ancient times. The myth of *The Giant's Causeway* tells the tale of Finn preparing to face off with the Scotish giant, Benandonner. When he laid his eyes upon the giant, Finn, the tenacious warrior and champion of Ireland, ran away like a little scaredy cat. And where did Finn run? Back home, to the safe embrace of his wife Oona. It was Oona who saved her husband by dressing him up as a baby, it was Oona who frightened Bendandonner away. The partnership of this couple saved them from an oncoming invader. This myth, like all mythology, is a reflection of the values of the culture from which it derives.

Just as Oona and Finn found solace within their domestic life, it was the security of the family that unified Irish culture. Interpersonal relationships were the ultimate act of rebellion for a people who had faced centuries of invasion and colonisation. Under the threat of repression, family both preserved national identity and gave said identity expression. Since the time of the Celts, marriage was a symbolic act that bound the Irish people, not only to one another, but to the land. Landholding was the basis for societal structure as it dictated the boundaries, both economic and social, in which each community functioned. Matrimoney and land were interconnected since the occupancy of land secured economic prosperity and communal membership which in turn permitted the act of marriage. However, this cultural organization would come to a crashing halt. The Great Famine, a nationwide crisis that ended with the

decimation of nearly a quarter of Ireland's population, was the most horrific moment in the island's long history. Death and disease ravaged the nation for four years, but the loss suffered would haunt the Irish people for centuries. Due to the chatachalismic effects of the famine, marriage began to reflect the increasing desire to preserve the central resource of land; matrimony among the Irish diminished as land availability dwindled. The blight created a new understanding amongst the Irish people that the events of the famine must never again occur. The effects of the Famine were so detrimental to the psyche of the Irish people that they began to change the very basis of their societal composition to ensure ongoing socioeconomic security.

Before the Great Famine, marriage amongst the Irish was plentiful due to a greater quality of life secured by the availability of land and the sustainability of the potato. Contrary to popular belief, life before the Great Famine was neither a bleak nor sorrowful existence. Instead, the average Irish peasant lived a life of relative comfort and security. The structure of land division in pre-famine Ireland allowed numerous individuals to obtain a basic level of land occupation and domestic stability. The majority of Irish peasants were too poor to buy land for themselves; rather their land occupation took the form of long-term rental. The Irish practiced the tradition of land division. This structure was introduced as a Penal Code in English law, ruling that "the estate of a Papist, for want of a Protestant heir, is to be divided, shared and share alike, among all his sons" (Yale University). Although land division was a tactic to disenfranchise the Irish Catholics by restricting their vocations, this system encouraged numerous small-scale rentals amongst large families. Farmland was traditionally owned by landlords who would rent their land to the local population. Farmers rented 15 acres of land while cottiers rented 5 acres. Impoverished peasants entered the conacre system, in which they would rent less than an acre of land for the main purpose of growing potatoes (Gray 26). Farms

were unusually small in Ireland, “In every country at least one-quarter of the holdings were less than 5 acres” (Freeman 54). As a result, the pre-famine population consisted of large numbers of families dwelling on small plots of land in which they had no legal entitlement. The land structure allowed for generation after generation to easily obtain both an occupation and a homestead.

At the heart of tenant farming was the potato, seeing that “No other country in Europe depended on the potato as extensively as the people of Ireland” (Kinealy 32). The potato was the only crop left for the Irish peasantry, as most agricultural and pastoral goods were exported to England as payment of rent. But the Irish did not need to rely on various crops since the nutritional value of the potato produced a standard level of health amongst the general population. As a result, the “Irish people tended to live longer, were healthier, better fed” which allowed the peasantry to maintain stable livelihoods and income (Kinealy 15). Additionally, the single-crop agriculture reinforced the cycle of subdivisions as “Subd-division could never have taken place without the potato: an acre and a half would provide a family of five or six with food for twelve months” (Woodham-Smith 35). The bare necessities of life were provided by subdivision and the potato, therefore securing a liberal attitude towards marriage amongst the Irish. Reflecting upon Irish marriage customs, English writer John Carr remarked that “the happy pair, united by their priest, entered their sylvan dwelling, and a rapid race of chubby boys and girls soon proves by what scanty means life can be sustained” (Gray 132).

The fluidity of the land ownership combined with the sustainability of the potato created a relaxed marriage culture within Pre-Famine Ireland. Marriage, in all cultures, is a social contract for security and partnership. A lack of resources entails a lack of marriage because no young person would dare enter a union with no prospects. But in Ireland, there was little fear of

disenfranchisement because the tools to survive were relatively guaranteed. The Irish entered marriage at a strikingly early age and married with more frequency. By “1841 only 10 per cent of the men and 12 per cent of the women aged 46-55 in rural areas were single” and within the “26-35 age group some two-thirds of the population were married” (Freeman 16). “Girls married at sixteen, boys at seventeen or eighteen” since there was little reason to wait to walk down the aisle (Woodham-Smith 30). The peasantry were not solely preoccupied with day-to-day survival, and this security allowed for a devotion to domestic life and the community at large.

The Great Famine left the Irish landscape decimated through the potato blight and large scale evictions which in turn exposed the population to a shared trauma. The famine began with the blight, a fungus that ravaged the most accessible food source in Ireland. When describing Ireland, Mr. William Monsell stated that “without the potato it could not have been created, and without the potato it cannot exist” (Freeman 15). The blight rotted every potato in the country, leaving the island to inevitable starvation if assistance was withheld. Ultimately, it would be the actions of the British government that would expedite the famine’s devastation. A major goal of British parliament was to force Irish landlords to take responsibility for their starving tenants. Despite the emaciation of the population and the loss of Ireland’s main source of industry, Parliament expected Ireland to cough up expenses needed to support itself. Initially, landlords were required to pay taxes on any land valued under £4. By 1847, landlords “were responsible for financing all current poor relief and for the repayment of various government loans” (Kinealy 216). The starving peasants had been unable to pay rent since the onset of the blight and the new policy left landlords in crippling debt. Their solution was to mercilessly evict their tenants in hopes the leftover land could be used for a more valuable purpose.

An 1847 account from the *Cork Examiner* recounted "The scene of the expulsion is Tonnymageera, near Mount Nugent, in the county Cavan, where ninety nine houses were pulled down, and the unfortunate occupants set adrift upon the world" (Expulsion of Tenantry). Another blow was dealt by the Quarter Acre Law Clause, which refused relief to any family holding more than a quarter-acre of land. Consequently, Irish farmers began to surrender their land as homelessness was a better option than death. The seizure of land, either by force or by free will, left tenants with "the same ordeal of wandering from house to house or burrowing in the bogs or behind ditches until, broken down by privation and exposure to the elements, they seek the workhouse or die by the roadside" (Kinealy 288). The Great Famine had effectively broken down the two key elements to Irish survival: the potato and landholding. Instead, day to day life of the Irish peasantry was marked by death and disease. Consequently, the Irish people would be traumatized by a grief that would embed itself within every fiber of their being. The famine had opened their eyes to the true extent of human suffering. The question remained of what was to come next.

Post-famine land structure and cultivation reflected a need for stability as a means to heal from the wounds of the famine. The famine left Ireland with a population of survivors who had been able to withstand starvation or emigration. "The main losers of the Famine were the cottiers and conacre laborers" whose disenfranchisement had signed their death sentence (Gray 119). Ironically, the prestigious landlords were left in economic ruin after their estates had fallen into tremendous debt. The Encumbered Estates Act of 1849 was an attempt by Parliament to fix the landlord's financial crisis by selling off financially ruined estates. Post-Famine Irlenad's societal landscape was marked by "the disappearance of the landless laborers and indebted landlords. Instead, strong farmers and rich merchants, who had survived the Famine… occupied a new

economic middle ground" (Kinealy 214). These middle class members had witnessed how a lack of legal protection for tenant farmers had brought absolute anarchy as the Famine spread. Therefore, the initiative of those who remained in Ireland was to own land because land rights were the only insurance against eviction or tenant abuse.

For this reason, newfound legislation reflected the urgent need of the agricultural community to stake claim within their lands and remove the power of the landlords. After the Famine, multiple homegrown movements developed throughout Ireland, the main focus of these movements being the "three F's"; fair rent, the fixity of tenure, and free sale. The "three F's" were a consolidation of requirements that Irish tenants felt necessary to preserve their livelihoods. Fair rent promised an affordable and fixed rate that would remain within a tenant's financial means. The fixity of tenure promised that the payment of rent alone would secure a family's ability to remain on the land. Free sale ensured the protection of tenants if there was a change of landlords. These demands represented a new voice amongst the Irish farmers, a voice that demanded basic human rights from a government that had continuously denied them. The demand for tenant rights became a reality with the Land Act of 1881 which "extended the three F's to all of Ireland and established a system to determine and enforce fair rates" (Guinnane and Miller 595). The 1881 legislation acted as a solid basis for how Parliament was to progress in mending agricultural abuses through the years. The Ashbourne Act of 1885 enabled grants for those intending to purchase land, thus opening an unprecedented opportunity to the Irish. In 1891, the Congested Districts Board was granted the "powers to purchase and redistribute land and relocate tenants where necessary" (Sexton and Kinealy 79). Because of the Board, "By the First World War, two-thirds of Irish tenants owned their own properties. When the Board was

dissolved in 1923, it had purchased over 1,000 estates" (Sexton and Kinealy 79). Farmers now had a taste of landownership and would fight to the end to preserve their newfound preservation.

In addition to legislation, the development of pastoral farming reflected a shift in attitude away from traditional farming tactics. Farmers looked to diversitize their production by rejecting the single-crop vegetation of pre-famine Ireland. Before the blight, most of the Irish peasantry opposed large-scale pastor farming in fear that they would be replaced by sheep or cows. But since the majority of the tenants had died or emigrated, the distaste for farm animals subsided and "By 1861, two-fifths of Irish land was grazing farms of one hundred acres or more" (Gray 118). The expansion of agriculture was coupled with the overall extension of farmland in general. Cultivated land experienced enormous growth as farmers made room for extensive vegetation and livestock, often merging with farms left unoccupied. Ireland consisted of 13,464 acres of farmland in 1841, a number that reached 15,349 acres in 1880 (Connell 82). As the population decreased, farm holdings became larger as a way to instigate the long-desired goal of land consolidation. Ireland began to leave its traditions behind as the nation took drastic action to ensure not only the success of farmland, but rather the success of Ireland as a nation.

The Great Famine resulted in both an acute awareness of the potential for human suffering and a greater desire for autonomy. As a result, marriage in post-famine Ireland would become restrictive, a shift that reflected deep anxieties that would burden the Irish through generations. The abolisment of subdivision and a lack of available land hindered potential matches by prolonging the traditional course of marriage within the Irish peasantry. The defining factor that secured marriage, both before and after the famine, was land. Landholding was a type of coming-of-age milestone on account that landholding signified to the community that a young man was financially secure and ready for a wife. In pre-famine Ireland, subdivisions granted

every son a sliver of land and made each young man socially available with little time or effort. Even if a father could not or would not provide land to a son, the conacre system guaranteed that the next step would be to procure a spouse. But once the blight brought to light the fragile infrustruce of subdivisions, secured land holding became the objective of rural communities rather than social expansion. Post-famine land inheritance would entitle a single son to the land, but only after his father gave the go ahead. The patriarchs of post-famine Ireland were made up of an entire generation who had witnessed mass evictions firsthand. Loss of land was the worst nightmare of any Irish farmer because this loss meant inevitable starvation and death. As a result of their psychological damage, the average patriarch felt that the "dominant position in home and farm was properly filled by himself and he was unwilling to relinquish it , or divide it, for the benefit of a son" (Connell 84). Farmers believed it was their life's duty to maintain their lands, waiting until old age or death to pass it over to any hands other than their own. As a result, younger men were forced to wait years before obtaining their inheritance and a bride.

While land inheritance impacted the eligibility of Irish men, the increasing importance of the dowry impacted the eligibility of Irish women. After the famine, marriage became a business deal between two fathers rather than the lovestruck decision of a young couple. Families demanded that marriages secure new resources and "When places on the land were scarce, no family brought in a new woman unless she paid her footing" (Connell 509). Like the single son land inheritance, only one daughter was granted a dowry per family. "In the 1880's Cork farmers paying rents of £30 to £40 a year were said to give their daughters dowaries of three or four hundred pound", therefore most families could only afford to give this vast amount of money to one daughter (Connell 504). Dowaries had to be extravagant as they provided important capital for a girl's future in-laws. Dowaries could provide land, purchase livestock, or finance home

construction. But generally, the money was given to sibling-in-laws, the loser secondary children of the single-heir policy. For these siblings, a dowry provided a chance to make something of themselves through more land, another dowry, or emigration. However, the expense of the dowry was a heavy toll and often took years of earning to formulate. Combined with the ever increasing age of eligible farmers, most women were also forced to wait well past their early twenties to find a husband. By "1851, 61% of men and 39% of women between 25-34 years of age were never married and the figures increased to 74% of men and 55% for women in 1936" (Kent 526).

As marriage was reserved for a single son and a single daughter within each household, many Irish people forewent marriage altogether and lived a celibant life of singlehood. "In 1851, 11% of the population were never married at 45-54 years and this percentage increased steadily over time to 34% for men and 25% for women in 1936" thereby reflecting the unimportance of marriage in the lives of some individuals (Kent 525). For the most part, celibacy was a way to ensure emigration for younger siblings. Siblings, who had "emigrated with the feeling that it was better done without a family, helped to make a people, long accustomed to youthful marriage, tolerant of prolonged celibacy" (Connell 86). Emigrants of the late 19th and early 20th centuries would often divide their time between Ireland and North America, moving with the goal to provide for their families back home. A marriage would have hindered their success in the new world. Siblings who found themselves in the modernized U.S were unable to return to the traditional agricultural existence of their native Ireland.

How does a country rebuild? That is the question Ireland faced in the wake of the Great Famine. As the blight continued, the Irish people lost the key ingredient vital to their livelihood; land which promised resources and a home. After the devastation subsided, farmers became

desperate to secure the dynastic success of their farm for future generations. While the subdivision system stunted the progression of the peasantry, a single-son inheritance ensured an orderly change of hands and an intact estate. Additionally the importance of the dowry increased, guaranteeing that each member of the family aid in the maintenance of the farm. Consequently, marriage was no longer a joyous social occasion determined by free will. Marriage came to reflect the structure of the land, meaning both infrastructures were now based on economic security. The Irish that had managed to survive the blight were haunted by their experiences and this devastation resulted in a complete overhaul of their cultural norms and values. Just as landholding became more centralized, the act of marriage was now a strategy to ensure familial survival and economic success.

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