An Gorta Mór – the impact and legacy of the Great Irish Famine

Lecture delivered by Mr. Éamon Ó Cuív, TD, Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, at St. Michael's College, University of Toronto, Canada, on Friday 8 May 2009

A dhaoine uaisle

I am very pleased to be here with you to deliver this lecture on **An Gorta Mór – the impact and legacy of the Great Irish Famine** as part of a programme of events here in Canada to mark the commemoration of the Irish famine and I would like to thank the authorities here in St Michael's College and the University of Toronto for their assistance in facilitating this event this evening. Over these few days, I will be participating in other events in Ireland Park here in Toronto and in Grosse Ile near Quebec. The events here in Canada are being paralleled in Ireland by a national commemoration next weekend, centred in Skibbereen, Co Cork. In future years, we hope that the famine commemorations will be held in other provinces of Ireland and in other countries that have a significant Irish diaspora.

The Irish famine of 1845-50 was the greatest social calamity – in terms of mortality and suffering – that Ireland has ever experienced. It was also the worst social calamity based on crop failure experienced in Europe (indeed, in the 'developed' world) in modern times. The terms in which it is described hint at its complexity, and at the different ways in which historians and the people at large have sought to describe and come to terms with the

calamity: it has been referred to as 'the great Irish famine', the 'great hunger', the 'Irish potato famine', an Gorta Mór and, in some Irish-language communities,'blianta an droch-shaoil' [meaning: the years of the bad life].

The salient facts of the calamity are not in dispute. From late summer 1845 a hitherto unknown fungus, to which there was then no known antidote, attacked and partially destroyed the potato crop in Ireland. In 1846 the blight was more severe and destroyed virtually the entire potato crop. The ravages of starvation and various diseases in 1847 earned for that year the grim description 'Black '47'. Though the blight was less severe in 1847, the potato harvest was poor, as seed potatoes had either been consumed during the scarcity in 1846 or had simply not been set, due to panic and the disruption of normal life. The blight was again severe in 1848, especially in the areas of greatest poverty and population pressure in the south and west. The partial failure of the potato in 1849 and 1850 prolonged the crisis and the suffering into the early 1850s.

During the crisis years, it is estimated that over one million Irish perished, from hunger or, more commonly, from hunger-related diseases. In the decade following 1846 – when the floodgates of emigration opened to a population fleeing a stricken land – more than 1.8 million Irish emigrated, with more than half of these fleeing (more as refugees than as emigrants, as the historian Peter Gray has remarked) during the famine years of 1846-50. The population of Ireland, which was close to 8.5 million in 1845, had fallen to 6.6 million by 1851. It would continue to fall – due to the relentless drain of emigration – for many decades to come.

How did it happen that the failure of a single root crop - the potato - in successive seasons produced such a terrible calamity in a country that was then an integral part of the United Kingdom, the state with the most advanced and developed economy in the world at the time? The general state of Irish agricultural produce in Ireland in the 1840s was healthy and developed: there was no general shortage of food. Might the crisis have been averted, or, at least, better dealt with? Could the mortality and suffering have been curtailed? Specifically, might more have been done by the government of the day to deal with the crisis, to save lives and ameliorate the suffering?

These are questions which tormented many contemporary witnesses to the calamity, and which continue to challenge historians and, indeed, all who have a concern with public policy in relation to food entitlements and the basic needs of people in our own time as well as in the recent past, and in all parts of the world.

For Irish people, at home and among the diaspora, there is a further challenging question. What were the consequences – immediate and long-term – of this terrible event for the later development of Irish society and for the understanding that Irish people at home and among the diaspora have of their own history and of the place of the Irish in the story of the modern world?

Ireland's population increased dramatically in the eighty years or so before 1845. The British state at war, and Britain experiencing early industrialization, combined to provide an incentive for the expansion of tillage and grain production in Ireland. Tillage needed a labour force. The

intensive cultivation of the acre-economising potato crop seemed to meet the multiple needs. An expanding labour force, cultivating the healthy potato on small plots for their own sustenance, and providing labour for the cash grain crop, gave increased income to the landlord and strong farmer from expanded tillage, while permitting the poor to increase and multiply. Some commentators saw dangers in the unchecked pursuit of increased tillage output by these means. But from about 2.6 million in 1750, the population surged to some 5 million in 1800, and further to some 7 million by 1821. The ending of the Napoleonic wars and changes in Britain's food needs resulted in a fall in agricultural prices after 1816, the fall being especially steep in grain prices. The incentive to incessant sub-division of small potato plots in the interests of a tillage labour force disappeared. Landlords sought to curtail sub-division, and to convert tillage to grass. It was not an easy task, and was sure to be resisted by those depending for their very survival on continued access to small plots. But, with a slight rise in the death rate and a significant rise in emigration, the rate of Irish population increase slackened from the 1820s. The 18th century emigration from Ireland across the Atlantic had been overwhelmingly Protestant and prudential. From 1815 to 1845 an estimated 1.5 million emigrants left Ireland. While this pre-famine surge still drew strongly from the northern half of the country and still included a sizable Protestant element, the spread of counties supplying emigrants was expanding and the Catholic share increasing. Yet, the persistence of a large population on the brink of subsistence continued to attract attention, and the government's response to this evidence of 'Irish poverty', was to establish a system of Workhouses, the total capacity of which would be around 100,000.

When the potato failed in 1845, therefore, huge numbers were 'at risk': perhaps a million and a half landless labourers were virtually totally dependent on the potato, while it was a major component of the diet of a further three million (cottiers and small-holders) of the rural poor. The recently established Workhouse system was overwhelmed by the tsunami of the desperate. The voluntary sector of charitable organizations – churches, local relief committees, contributions from overseas – was likewise overwhelmed by the scale of the crisis, though much heroic work of charity was accomplished in the famine years. What of the government response? There has been bitter controversy and recrimination - at the time of the famine and since - regarding the state's response to the crisis generated by the failure of the potato. But at this remove in time (and in the light of the historical evidence), we may say that the 'relief' measures adopted by successive governments (Sir Robert Peel's Conservatives in 1845/46, Lord John Russell's Whig government from 1847) were fatally compromised by ideological and attitudinal limitations. The ministers, and their advisors, showed an almost blind faith in the virtues of the 'free market' – in commodities and labour. Believing firmly in laissez faire, they sought to ensure that no action or intervention of the government would undermine the rules and operation of the market. To this ideological rigidity we must add a host of logistical difficulties encountered in distributing 'Indian meal' (and, for a time, soup) as substitute food for the famished poor. There were mistakes and poor planning in the timing of different phases of the relief programmes - from public works schemes, to food distribution, to Workhouse-only relief. All of these factors adversely affected the government's relief measures and contributed to the massive loss of life.

Alongside these operational shortcomings and inadequacies in government relief measures, we may admit that there was a degree of parsimony in government expenditure on Irish famine relief, not least because an influential segment of British public opinion held that the obligation to support 'Irish poverty' in its time of crisis rested primarily with Irish property-owners. More controversially, there is evidence among influential members of the political (and intellectual) establishment of the day of a strain of Providentialism in their response to the Irish famine. That is to say, in an age of strong religious belief, there were those who saw the Irish famine as a kind of Divine Visitation. Some saw this in fairly apocalyptic terms as a punishment of the Irish for the reckless improvidence of their population growth. A less extreme version of Providentialism interpreted the terrible 'visitation' of the potato blight as an instrument for finally checking runaway Irish population growth among the poor, the ultimate outcome of which might prove salutary, if it resulted in a decisive re-adjustment of population to resources. It should be said, however, that even those (such as Charles Trevelyan, the senior civil servant in charge of the famine relief measures) who held such views of the providential role of the famine, at no time deliberately sought to deepen or prolong the Irish crisis. So far as the ordinary Irish poor were concerned, they too were deeply religious: but not all of them were prepared to accept the decimation brought by the potato failure as part of a divine plan, as the lines of the Waterford poet remind us:

Is ní hé Dia a cheap riamh an obair seo,
Daoine bochta do chur le fuacht is le fán;
Iad a chur sa phoorhouse go dúbhach is glas orthu,
Lánúineacha pósta is iad scartha go bás.

[meaning, in broad terms, that God did not create this situation, with poor suffering people being put into the poorhouse, where married couples were separated onto death].

Indeed, the clinical statistics, the theories and analyses of ministers and administrators, and the dispassionate verdict of the historian offer us one set of explanations for the famine. But the harrowing realities of death and despair during the crisis years register more directly in the accounts of contemporary witnesses to the event. These accounts describe the scenes of desolation in the Irish countryside, in the cabins and ditches, and also the trials of the flight for the tens of thousands, especially on the 'coffin ships', of the transatlantic route during the long and hazardous crossings.
The horror of famine conditions around Skibbereen in West Cork were widely reported in the contemporary press, and in neighbouring Ballydehob a reporter announced:

> ***Greater misery was reserved for me in Ballydehob. Here they are in a deplorable state dying in all directions. The people are living on sea-weed and cattle they steal. On Sunday night they broke into the food-store and stole all that was in it. There were thirteen burials in Schull yesterday and not one of them had a coffin.***

Such accounts could be replicated from all the more congested districts of the western part of Ireland, and from other areas also.

And this following account - particularly poignant for a Canadian audience - is by passenger Robert Whyte (a middle-class emigrant) of a voyage of a coffin ship crossing to Quebec in 1847:

> *June 15, 1847(at sea): The reports this morning were very afflicting, and I felt much that I was unable to render any assistance to my poor fellow passengers. The captain… felt much alarmed; nor was it to be wondered at that contagious fever …should terrify one having the charge of so many human beings, likely to fall prey to the unchecked progress of the dreadful disease. For, once having shown itself in the unventilated hold of a small brig, containing 110 living creatures, how could it possibly be stayed without suitable medicines, medical skill and pure water to slake the patients' burning thirst. The prospect before us was indeed an awful one, and there was no hope for us but in the mercy of God.*

> *June 25: This morning there was a further accession to the names upon the sick roll. It was awful how suddenly some were stricken. A little child, playing with his companions, suddenly fell down, and for some time sunk in deadly torpor, from which when he awoke he commenced to scream violently and wreath in convulsive agony.*

> *June 27: It made my heart bleed to listen to the calls of 'Water, for God's sake, Water. Oh it was horrifying…*

The desperate cargo reached Grosse Isle on July 28th, after a voyage of two months.

Understanding or assessing the complex consequences (or impact) of the Irish Famine remains a challenge not only to historians, but to all of us concerned with the story of modern Ireland and of its people.

The immediate demographic impact was dramatic. As I mentioned at the outset, the population fell from almost 8.5 million in 1845 to 6.6 million in 1851. Moreover, the story of Irish population change in the decades after 1851 was unique among the peoples of Europe. Ireland's population continued to decline: from 6.6 million in 1851 to 4.4 million in 1911. The key factor in explaining this unique demographic history was **emigration**. Ireland in the later 19th century did not experience a major decline in the birth-rate or a major increase in the death-rate. The marriage rate fell, with more adults remaining single, especially in rural areas. But the birth rate within marriage remained strong. Moreover, though the potato continued in the post-famine decades to be an important crop in both the human diet and for farmyard animal feed, particularly in the west of Ireland, no major subsistence crisis threatened to bring high mortality after 1850. The key factor was **emigration**, which, though it varied in volume from decade to decade (the 1880s were especially heavy, the early 1900s especially light), consistently eclipsed the natural rate of increase in the population.

The famine years – as we have noted – did not begin the heavy outflow of emigration from Ireland. Already in the thirty years after Waterloo, some 1.5 million had emigrated from Ireland. But the famine outflow – an exodus from 1846 – turned a strong tide into a torrent. It deeply embedded a culture of 'exit' from Ireland, and as the generation of the famine emigrants settled in their new countries, they created networks of Irish communities overseas

to receive, assist and sustain the chain migration of Irish emigrants, following their family and neighbours across the seas to start a new life and find new opportunities. This fatalistic acceptance by many families that the shedding of their siblings would inevitably mean emigration - *an bád bán a bhí i ndán dúinn* [meaning 'we were destined for the white ship'] - became a deeply ingrained attitude among later generations of Irish, and had a profound effect on many aspects of Irish social and cultural life.

The volume of famine and post-famine is important. So also is its structure, and the differential impact that it had on so many aspects of Irish life. Thus, in considering the immediate and progressive impact of the famine on the social or class structure of rural Ireland, we see at once that the famine decimated the rural 'underclass' (an 'chosmhuintir') – labourers, cottiers (working 1-5 acre holdings) and small farmers. These were the classes that continued to be, disproportionately, drained off by the emigration of later decades.

Fig 1

Year	Labourers	Cottiers (under 5)	Small farmers (5-15 acres)	Farmers (over 15 acres)
1845	700,000	300,000	310,000	277,000
1851	500,000	88,000	192,000	290,000
1910	300,000	62,000	154,000	304,000

Famine deaths disproportionately affected the very young and the very old (though no age-group escaped completely). Mortality was heaviest in the west and the south, though again, no area escaped entirely: urban areas experienced a temporary inflow of famished and disease-carrying rural poor, and an outbreak of cholera in 1849 increased the urban death toll. Furthermore, in the post-famine decades (and notably from the 1880s), the western half of the country (west of a line from Loch Swilly in the north of Ireland to west Cork in the south) continued to supply the larger share of the emigrant outflow. In all, some 8 million souls emigrated from Ireland in the period 1800-1914, with about 6 million of these going during the famine and post-famine decades. It was indeed an exodus.

The state infrastructure for the relief of poverty established on the eve of the Famine – the Workhouse as a refuge of last resort for the 'deserving poor' – remained the key institution for poor relief in Ireland for a time after the famine. But over time – and increasingly under the direction and administration of religious orders and charitable bodies – these institutions became more health-focused (becoming hospitals). But the stigma of the 'poorhouse' was to linger for a long time in Ireland.

The **economic impact** of the Famine is difficult to assess, or to quantify precisely. The decimation (through death and emigration) of a subsistence rural underclass of potato eaters may, on the face of it, have improved GDP per capita. But against that we must set the *potential* loss of human resources (potentially as a labour force or as consumers) caused by the demographic reverse. One immediate consequence is clear. The cost of poor relief (and

the loss of rents) proved to be the last straw for many landlords already heavily encumbered with debts. When the government passed a special Encumbered Estates Act (in 1849) to ease the task of disposing of debt-ridden landed estates, some 14% of the land of Ireland changed hands within a decade.

In a wider economic context, the fact that the Famine crisis in Ireland precipitated the abolition of the Corn Laws (by Peel), and, in effect, the inauguration of a fully free trade regime in food commodities for the UK (including Ireland), was a vital factor in Ireland's economic development (and difficulties) until the end of the Union. However, we must also consider the fact that the extension of the railway network throughout Ireland from the 1850s coincided in many areas with the post-famine reconfiguration of the Irish economy and Irish society. The railway (for freight and passenger traffic) was a vital agent of economic and social change in the second half of the 19th century in Ireland, facilitating and accelerating changes in retail and distribution; that is, in the integration of hitherto isolated areas and communities into the commercial (wholesale/retail) economy. The railway facilitated mobility (commercial travellers and tourists coming 'in'; emigrants going 'out'), and changed patterns of communication (including language-use).

The seismic impact of the famine on the subsistence tillage economy based on potato cultivation proved decisive. While tillage staged a brief recovery in the immediate post-famine decade in certain areas, the long-term shift in Irish agriculture (already apparent since 1815) was to livestock and dairying as the key components of Irish land use and agricultural production.

The profile of the emigrants of the famine and post-famine years had serious implications for Irish economic, socio-cultural and political development. Irish emigrants in the post-famine decades featured a disproportionately high quota of single young adults (aged 18-35), and, unusually for European migrations, a roughly equal share of men and women. Indeed, from the 1880s women constituted a small majority of the Irish emigrant stream. There is no conclusive evidence that those who left were, in the main, more educated than those in the same age groups who stayed. A more difficult question is whether, by the very act of their setting out for a new life, those who left showed more energy, more initiative, than those who stayed. Certainly it was a common refrain that the 'brightest and best left': but such rhetoric must be treated with caution. What is undeniable is the fact that with the more challenging and (in economic terms) productive 18-35age group severely depleted by emigration, the Irish society that remained was top heavy in the dependency groups (the old and the very young), and was in general terms a more conservative society than it might have been had more of the challenging young remained at home. Moreover, by European standards, the Irish who emigrated long distances (to North America or to Australia) had a relatively low return rate. Again, the challenge of the 'returned' emigrant was limited. Of course, this balancing of values and attitudes in society at large is difficult to estimate with confidence.

The Famine had **complex political consequences**. Its immediate impact was to hasten the final dissolution of Daniel O'Connell's mass campaign for the Repeal of the Union. An attempt at rebellion in the ravaged Ireland of 1848 was likewise doomed to failure, though many of the leaders of that failed rebellion would soon regroup, at home and in exile, to found the clandestine

Fenian movement, dedicated to establishing an independent Irish republic, by force if required. But, at a deep level, the Famine raised fundamental questions regarding the 'legitimacy', as it were, of the authority of the British state and parliament in Ireland. Was it conceivable, Irish nationalists asked, that the Famine calamity could have been so severe or allowed run its course for so long, had Ireland her own institutions of representative self-government, her own parliament? Thousands of Irish among the diaspora shared the verdict of their fellow nationalists at home that the Famine provided conclusive evidence that Ireland's future development and prosperity demanded that she achieve self-government. The precise form of that self-government would be debated for some time to come; but the settled instinct for its necessity had become firmly rooted.

The **cultural impact** of the famine on Irish society was profound. Contemporary commentators – such as Sir William Wilde, the father of the writer Oscar – remarked that many of the social pastimes of the countryside had been abandoned in the trauma of the famine years. Many of these pastimes never returned. What is striking about the social life and habits of the post-famine decades is the increasing prominence and influence of the Catholic Church in all aspects of the social life of its congregation. As the population declined, the numbers of priests, nuns and religious brothers increased dramatically in the post-famine decades. The priest-to-people ratio was transformed. The infrastructure, no less than the personnel, of the Church expanded (schools, colleges, hospitals, charitable institutions). The devotional life of the people became increasingly clergy-led, church-centred and mediated through the associational culture directed by the Church – in the form of confraternities, missions, sodalities. This cultural shift was

already underway in certain dioceses in the east of the country before the famine: it now became the dominant pattern of the religious culture of the people, though older forms of 'customary' religious practice never died out completely in the more remote rural districts. Religious observance was extraordinarily high among the ordinary people in late 19th century Ireland. It was an integral part of the 'cultural capital' that emigrants brought with them to their new countries of settlement.

The famine had a drastic impact on the balance of language-use in Ireland. The Irish language had been displaced from all the commanding heights of the state and the public life of the country since the time of the conquest in the 16th and 17th centuries. The relentless abandonment of Irish, and the exclusive adoption of English as a vernacular, had been a feature of the path of upward mobility and 'involvement' in the civic (and, in time, the political) life of the country throughout the 18th and early 19th century. In class terms, Irish was the language of 'the lower classes' by the end of the 18th century, though poets and transcribers of manuscripts were still not entirely bereft of patronage. The state system of elementary education after 1831 further consolidated and accelerated this language shift. And yet, by the 1840s, because the population increase was greatest among the poorer classes, there were more Irish speakers in Ireland than at any time before or since. At the start of the 19th century it has been estimated that Ireland had 2 million Irish speakers, 1.5 million Irish-English bilinguals and 1.5 million English speakers. The poor continued to multiply up to the Famine. But the monolingual Irish speakers were very badly hit by the decimation of the rural poor during the Famine. The 1851 census (the first to include a language 'question') revealed that the total number of Irish speakers had

declined to 1.52 million (about 25% of the population). But, as Máirtín Ó Murchú has remarked: "..a precipitant shift to English was under way: the percentage of Irish speakers in the under-10 age group was 12.6%, against 22.23% in the 10-19 age-group, and 24.9% in the 20-29 age-group. So it continued. By 1891, for the whole of Ireland, the percentage of Irish speakers in the under-10 age-group had declined to 3.5%, and the language appeared to be on the point of extinction".

The Gaelic League, and the Irish State after 1922, would ensure that this did not happen. Moreover, in the cultural revival at the end of the 19th century that sought to arrest and then reverse the decline of Irish as a vernacular, the support of the Irish of the diaspora was invaluable, as Douglas Hyde and other leading champions of the language revival appreciated and acknowledged. Indeed, when we consider the remarkable advances which are currently under way in teaching the Irish language to enthusiastic learners throughout North America, let us also remember those thousands of Irish-speaking emigrants who crossed the Atlantic in the famine and post-famine years, a number of whom (such as Pádraig Feirtéir) included a bundle of their Irish manuscripts, that they had copied from older sources, among the meagre store of possessions that they carried with them.

Finally, the impact of the Famine on the later history of the Irish of the diaspora was profound. Those who fled the stricken land in the famine years were unlikely to receive a warm welcome in the lands for which they set sail. The sight of these emaciated boat-people from Ireland (many speaking a strange language, many more likely to be carrying infectious diseases) must have excited fear and hostility among the host population of ports in

Canada, the USA or Britain. The anti-Irish prejudice that they encountered (salted, at certain times and in certain places, with sectarian prejudice) was to endure for a long time. But the instinct for survival, the will to live, which had seen the famine emigrants survive the calamity and the ocean crossing, must have been extraordinarily strong. It must have been one of the main factors that enabled them, and in time their children, to put down firm roots in their new countries. This determination to survive and to succeed was passed on to later generations of the Irish of the diaspora, and must have inspired them as they made their mark and reached the top in every area of the new societies in which they settled.

For a significant number of the Irish of the diaspora, the Irish famine was an important part of their self-awareness. Some retained a close interest in their homeland and sought to contribute to its progress and development. This would mean, in some instances, support for movements dedicated to achieving an independent Irish state, or for strengthening the various strands of Irish cultural identity (the Gaelic League, the Literary Revival, the Gaelic Athletic Association and so on). In more recent times, economic co-operation and investment, and philanthropic work, have marked the continuing interest of the Irish of the diaspora in maintaining the links with their ancestral homeland.

Here in St. Michael's College this evening, may I salute one further manifestation of this extraordinary rich and enduring connection between the Irish of the diaspora and the people of Ireland. I refer, of course, to the strong development of Irish Studies programmes in universities and colleges across the world, not least here in Canada. St. Michael's College was a

pioneer in this happy cultural and academic dialogue in Canada, and one may call to mind some of those who started it all and those who sustain it: Fr. Kelly and Robert O'Driscoll, Anne Dooley and Máirín Nic Dhiarmada, and all who have contributed to Irish Studies in St. Michael's and indeed, through CAIS, throughout Canada, in recent decades. That the Irish language is now a core element of many of these Irish Studies programmes is a source of particular pride and satisfaction to those of us in Ireland who cherish the living language, as well as the literary glories of the past.

Finally, may I conclude by thanking St Michael's College for hosting this event and by thanking all of you for your kind attention. Go raibh míle maith agaibh uile.