

Carleton & others on famine's darkest secret¹

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Three and a half decades ago John Post, a historian at Boston's Northeastern University, produced a great book called *The Last Great Subsistence Crisis in the Western World* (1977). The book was about the famine that followed the dark summer of 1816, when (in Lord Byron's words) 'The bright sun was extinguish'd, and the stars did wander darkling in the eternal space, rayless, and pathless, and the icy earth swung blind and blackening in the moonless air'.

I don't need to tell you that John Post's striking title was a misnomer. In the western world, the era of famine—and famine is defined here as 'a shortage of food or purchasing power that leads directly to excess mortality from starvation or hunger-induced diseases'—would not end for another 130 years. The famines linked to the failure of the potato in the 1840s, including the Great Irish Famine but lesser famines too in the Low Countries and in Prussia, were still to come, as was the Finnish famine of 1868, the massive Soviet famines of 1920-22 and 1931-33, and the war famines of World War 2. But the dubious distinction of 'last subsistence crisis in the western world' goes to Moldova and adjoining parts of Ukraine in 1946-47.

This was no small famine, relatively speaking; it seems that in Moldova as many as 0.2 million out of a population of 2.5 million perished. But little has been written about it and what has been written has been colored by the Cold War. For VF Zima it was the product of excessive grain procurements;

for Stephen Wheatcroft it must be analyzed against the backdrop of a critical food supply situation in the Soviet Union and elsewhere at the time. And there is no denying the role of food supply: in 1945 in the Russian Federation, less affected than the famine zones, grain output was less than half the prewar norm; in the following year it was lower still.

Two generations on, the Moldovan famine remains a highly contentious and emotive issue in Moldova itself. As recently as 2006, the Moldovan legislature rejected an attempt to provide 'a political and legal appreciation' of the 1946-1947 Moldovan famine. Opposition deputies described the famine as 'premeditated', but the official line—from a pro-Moscow administration—was that while there was no denying that there had been a famine, it had 'a pragmatic explanation historically demonstrated: the difficult post-war period, the poor crops, and the drought'. Stalin shared the blame, but only insofar as he did not react in time.

One aspect of the famine in Moldova that makes its memory more fraught is the gruesome suggestion that 'the eating of corpses took place on a large scale'. The authorities were aware of it—they even showed Alexei Kosygin, then a candidate politburo member and sent from Moscow to investigate, a dead body that had been prepared for eating—and sought to stamp it out. There were stories of murder-cannibalism, including one of 'a peasant woman from the village of Tambula', who had 'killed two of her four children, a girl of six and a boy of five, with a view to eating them', and 'another peasant from the village of Cajba' who had 'killed his 12-year-old grandson who had come to visit and ate him'.

Cannibalism is famine's darkest secret, a taboo topic. It is not a feature of all famines but it is, I think, more common that lots of people care to imagine. It is a measure of how unimaginably horrific famines are.

Of all the horrors of famine, this may be the most unsettling. Writing against the background of the Russian famine of 1921-22, which cost millions of lives and during which he claimed cannibalism was 'an ordinary occurrence', sociologist Pitirim Sorokin pointed out that the practice entailed the suppression not only of religious, moral, legal, and aesthetic reflexes, but also those related to group preservation. Much in the same vein, Danish anthropologist Kirsten Hastrup has argued that when famine results in cannibalism it has gone 'far beyond mensurational reach' to a level of 'hardship so extreme that humanity itself seems at stake'. That is why we don't like to talk about it. And that is precisely why we must not ignore it.

Hastrup did not distinguish 'survivor cannibalism'—survivors consuming the corpses of those who have already died—and what might be called 'murder cannibalism', i.e. murdering people for meat. During the Great North China Famine of 1876-78, in a widely reproduced letter the Catholic bishop of Shansi reported that 'until lately the starving people were content to feed on the dead; but now they are slaughtering the living for food'. In Russian, too, there are different words to describe murdering for food (*lyudoedstvo*) and corpse consumption (*trupoedstvo*).

As in the case of ritual cannibalism, the record on famine cannibalism is also contested. William Chester Jordan, historian of the Great Northern

European Famine of the early fourteenth century, notes that references to famine cannibalism may act as a form of cliché to convey the 'stark horror' of famine conditions: 'to make a famine real, one had to include cannibalism in the story'. And famine historian David Arnold dismisses most of the evidence for it as 'second-hand and hearsay'. Stories of famine cannibalism have also been invoked for pejorative purposes, as part of a narrative that demonizes 'outsiders'. Recurrent references to old women or 'hags' devouring children recall sinister narratives of witchcraft: and who believes in witches anymore?

Yet several well-known and well-documented historical episodes highlight how desperate people can be driven to cannibalism during life-threatening food emergencies. Examples (in chronological order) include:

- The surviving crew of the Nantucket whaling ship Essex, sunk by a sperm whale in the south Atlantic in 1821;
- The Donner party of American pioneers, some of whom resorted to cannibalism when stranded high in California's Sierra Nevada during the winter of 1846-47;
- Explorer Sir John Franklin and his crew who met their deaths in attempting to find the Northwest Passage in 1847, and some of whom, according to Inuit accounts now backed by recent archaeological research, engaged in cannibalism;
- Tom Dudley and Edwin Stephens, survivors of another south Atlantic shipwreck over six decades later in 1884, whose trial for the

cannibalistic murder of cabin boy Richard Parker gave rise to a celebrated judicial verdict denying, in effect, that necessity knew no law;

- Japanese troops in New Guinea towards the end of World War 2, as described in Kazuo Hara's disturbing 1987 documentary, 'The Emperor's Naked Army Marches On'. Prohibited from surrendering and cut off from food supply chains, some resorted to cannibalism. Several Japanese military were found guilty of sanctioning or engaging in cannibalism against civilian populations and enemy soldiers by the Tokyo War Crimes Trials and executed for their crimes. Survivor cannibalism also features in *Fires on the Plain*, the 1951 novel by Ooka Shohei about a lone soldier in the Philippines at the end of World War 2;
- In Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in 1943-45 cannibalism compounded, if that were possible, the horrors of the Holocaust
- The survivors of the crash of Uruguayan Air Force Flight 571 in the Andes in 1973, some of whom initially refused to resort to cannibalism, but relented after a few days when all other food supplies were exhausted.

I do not include the case of recently arrived colonists in Jamestown, Virginia who—so it was claimed—'driven thru insufferable hunger to eat those things which nature most abhorred', resorted to cannibalism during the winter of 1609-10, because this particular instance, long accepted, has

recently been contested. I also exclude an account from Athens during the famine of 1941-42, where cannibalism is a plausible inference, but unproven.

While never widespread and never responsible for more than a miniscule fraction of famine deaths, references to famine cannibalism recur throughout history. Like much else about famine, it is mentioned in the Old Testament. Conditions during the Syrian siege of Samaria in the ninth century BC were so severe that 'a donkey's head was sold for eighty pieces of silver, and the fourth part of a *kab* (or pint) of wild onions for five pieces of silver' (2 Kings 6: 25-28). And 2 Kings 6 continues:

And as the king of Israel was passing by on the wall, a woman cried to him, saying, 'Help, my lord, O king'. And he said, 'If the Lord doesn't help you, how can I help you? Out of the barn floor, or out of the winepress?' And the king said to her, 'What ails you?' And she answered, 'this woman said to me, Give your son, so that we may eat him today, and we'll eat my son tomorrow. So we boiled my son, and ate him: and I said to her on the next day, Give your son, so that we may eat him: and she has hid her son'.

The reluctance of mothers to kill their own children is a theme repeated in later accounts.

References to famine cannibalism thereafter range from an account from Edessa in 503-4AD, where the local general executed those guilty of murdering for food but gave leave to eat the corpses of the dead 'and this they did openly, eating the flesh of dead men', to an account describing

Egypt in the early 1200s, when at first it 'formed the subject of every conversation' but 'eventually people grew accustomed, and [made] these detestable meats ... their ordinary provender'; and from stories of mothers eating their own children during the apocalyptic Ethiopian famine of 1889-91 to a case in war-torn Scotland in 1341AD when 'the starving sufferers were compelled to feed on substances most abhorrent to human appetite; and one wretch called Christian Cleik, with his wife, subsisted on the flesh of children whom they caught in traps and devoured. These wretched cannibals were detected, condemned, and burned to death'.

Not all accounts are equally plausible. A striking feature of some is their rather non-judgmental tone. Accounts of famine cannibalism often display an understanding, if not outright empathy, towards those engaging in the practice. In Hara's 1987 documentary former soldier Kenzo Okuzaki more than once stated that he did not condemn the perpetrators, but 'those who put them in that situation'.

Those cameos of cannibalism described earlier refer to localized crises: what of major famines? At the height of the Soviet famine of 1920-22 cases of both kinds of cannibalism were well documented; indeed, an officially sanctioned exhibition close to the Kremlin highlighted the urgency of the situation with gruesome images of it. Communist Party newspapers carried reports of it for their shock value, and a poster on display in Moscow read 'these people who eat their dead because they are hungry are not cannibals; the cannibals are those who do not give their surplus to the hungry'.

A decade later, during Stalin's collectivization famine, there were reports of murder cannibalism too:

Every day there were cases of cannibalism. Mothers killed their children and ate them up. In such villages as Kordyshivka, Soshenske, [and] Pytiiv, cannibalism was very widespread. It was awfully dangerous for a person who looked good to go there. I don't know why people change so much. Ukrainians are very generous and very kind people, but during that hunger they looked like wolves.

In a March 1933 survey of forty-two districts in Ukraine in which starvation was rife, the Kiev secret police listed seventy-two cases of *lyudoedstvo* (murder cannibalism) and sixty-five of *truppoedstvo* (corpse consumption). The authorities punished the former, though 'not nearly as severely as say the theft of a horse or a cow from a collective farm'.

Again, evidence for cannibalism during the blockade-famine of Leningrad during World War II is plentiful. At the height of the crisis, between early December 1941 and mid-February 1942, nearly nine hundred people were arrested for unspecified crimes relating to cannibalism. Harsh repression and an attenuation of the crisis reduced its incidence thereafter. In west Papua during World War 2 Japanese officers who engaged in cannibalism singled out 'unpopular soldiers', 'troublemakers and selfish ones'.

Finally, turning to the very recent past, histories of the Chinese Great Leap Forward famine of 1959-61, most notably Yang Jisheng's *Tombstone*, have highlighted incidents of cannibalism. Inconclusive about its extent,

another high-profile account claims that 'in the midst of state-sponsored violence... necrophagy was neither the most common nor the most widespread way of degrading a human being'. But famine cannibalism was nothing new in China in 1959-1961: instances were reported in Henan in 1942, in Sichuan in 1936, in Gansu in 1929, in Shansi during the Boxer rebellion in 1900, in northern China during the 'incredible' famine of 1876-78, and in Nanking in 1861.

And yet, although cannibalism is a recurring feature of accounts of famine, by no means all famines led to it. Thierry Brun guards against lumping all famines together in a quest for universal patterns, and notes in particular that the atmosphere of despair and cruelty which was linked to cannibalism during the Soviet famine of 1920-22 is absent in the Biafra famine of the late 1960s and also the Sahel famine of 1972-73. There is no evidence for it during the Great Bengal Famine of 1943-44, for example, and nineteenth-century Indian famines also seem to have been free of it. One exceptional example refers to a woman belonging to an obscure flesh-eating caste who had survived the famine of 1896-97 by eating corpses floating in a river.

More recent famines in sub-Saharan Africa have yielded little evidence of cannibalism either. True, the official responsible for relief during the Ethiopian famine of 1984-85 told Australian novelist Thomas Keneally that he had witnessed cannibalism 'in an inadequate feeding centre in the Ethiopian highlands', for which (according to his informant) 'these people were not to blame'. But cannibalism does not feature in accounts of major famines in the Sahel, in Biafra, and elsewhere.

Is there evidence for cannibalism during Irish famines? References to cannibalism are not the same thing as hard evidence of it; but references are quite plentiful. The earliest Irish mention of famine cannibalism that I could find refers to 698-700AD, when according to the medieval *ChroniconScotorum*, '*fames et pestilentia iii annis in Hibernia factaest, ut homo hominem comederet*'. There is a hint of cannibalism too in the *Fragmentary Annals of Ireland*'s entry for 700AD, which refers to 'the greatest famine, in which men were reduced to unmentionable foods'.

The *ChroniconScotorum*'s entry for 1116AD notes that in the wake of an attack on Thomond by Toirdhealbach Ó Conchubhair '*Gortamorisinerrach go recad an fer a mac & a inginarbiadh& go n-ithdísna daoine cidh a chéleann&na coin. FasughadhLaigenuile (acht beg)& a sgaoiledhfoEirinnargorta*(Great famine in the spring so that a man would sell his son and his daughter for food and men would even eat one another, and dogs. All Leinster was almost emptied, and scattered throughout Ireland on account of the famine).'¹ The sale of children is a recurrent feature of famine history, but the reference to cannibalism here does not imply that children were being sold for consumption. Cannibalism was also recorded in the mid-1310s during Robert the Bruce's Irish campaign: '*do ithdaisnadainecinamuras a cheliarfodErenn* (and undoubtedly men ate each other in Ireland)', when warfare exacerbated the impact of dismal harvests.

Edmund Spenser's *View of the Present State of Ireland*, describing Munster in the 1580s, reported that 'they (the surrendering rebels) looked like anatomyes of death, they spake like ghostes crying out of theyr graves; they did eat of the dead carrions, happy where they yfthey could finde them, yea, and one another soone after...' Admittedly, Spenser's claim may have been based on hearsay, although he was in Ireland at the time. Less than two decades later Fynes Morison, travel writer and propagandist, wrote of war-induced famine in County Down towards the end of the Nine Years War:

Captain Trevor and many honest gentlemen lying in the Newry can witness, that some old women of those parts used to make a fire in the fields, and divers little children driving out the cattle in cold mornings, and coming thither to warm them, were by them surprised, killed and eaten, which at last was discovered by a great girl breaking from them by strength of her body, and Captain Trevor sending out soldiers to know the truth, they found the children's skulls and bones, and apprehended the old women, who were executed for the fact.

Shades of Hanzl and Gretl, perhaps! A later commentator, more sympathetic to the old women, did not deny their deed but added: 'The authors of the famine were the authors of cannibalism, not the unfortunate hags, who were driven by the extremity of hunger to that shocking sustenance'. In a reversal of the 'hags' motif, Moryson also wrote of 'a most horrible Spectacle of three Children (whereof the eldest was not above ten Years old,) all eating and gnawing with their Teeth the Entrails of their dead

Mother, upon whose Flesh they had fed 20 Days past'. Again, a little skepticism seems appropriate here; surely it would have taken less than twenty days for flesh to rot?

Nor was the discourse purely a colonialist one. Tarlach Ó Mealláin, a Franciscan friar, kept a *cín lae* (diary) while on the run during the early stages of the Confederate Wars in Ulster in 1643. This was a time of widespread famine. Ó Mealláin's reference to cannibalism is probably to corpse consumption:

It was also resolved that whoever should steal a cow or horse, steed or gelding, sheep or goat or the value of any of these, would have a like amount confiscated from him, if he were a man of means; or hanged, if he were a man of no means... Many other fine decisions were made. There are people in the country, Ó Catháins, O'Devlins, O'Haras, and the people of Iveagh, all of Clandeboy and the Route [reduced to] eating horses and steeds; the end of spring; stealing; carrying off cats; dogs; eating humans [corpses?]; rotten leather; and undressed leather.

The following excerpt from the May 1645 deposition by one Peter Hill of County Down recalls Fynes Moryson's account of the same county some four decades earlier:

That since the Rebellion began but especially for a year and above now last past it hath been a very common & ordinary thing for the Irish to murder, devour, and eat the persons of such English as they could light upon, and when they could light upon none of

them then to kill devour and eat one another. And about one year now since there was brought to this deponent at his house called Ballyhornan an Irish woman for wounding & attempting to kill another Irish woman and her child which woman so accused & brought before him upon her examination confessed that she had hurt (but had an intent to have killed) the other woman and her child, and to have eaten the child, whereupon & because he was credibly informed that such a like fat woman had killed and devoured divers others, he this deponent caused her to be hanged... About the time aforesaid viz. a year since three troopers under the Lord Conway's command going out for Lisnegarvie over the River into the County of Down with their horses about 2 miles off to fetch home grass were suddenly surprised by some of the Irish together with their horses which three troopers were then and there murdered, and afterwards their flesh eaten and devoured by divers barbarous Irish women that lay in the woods. And the very bones of those men were afterwards found in the woods clean picked and the flesh (first as was conceived boiled) eaten quite off the same.

Even after discounting for its strong sectarian tone, this rather sounds like famine cannibalism. There is a claim that people also resorted to cannibalism in 1652-53, again a time of severe famine: Richard Lawrence was 'credibly informed that they digged Corps out of the Grave to eat', and described an eye-witness account of old women and children eating such a corpse. Again, what credence do we place in 'credibly informed'? Note that all the above instances except (perhaps) the first occurred during periods of civil war or colonial conquest.

However, there is no evidence for cannibalism during the famine of 1728-30, nor during the much more serious famine of 1740-41. Our next mention of cannibalism in Ireland turns out to have been bogus, but is worth describing as an example of how elusive evidence for cannibalism can be. It relates to an incident in Wexford in the wake of the 1798 Rising as described by the often amusing but not always reliable Sir Jonah Barrington:

During the rebellion... Mr. Waddy, a violent loyalist... fled to a castle at a considerable distance from the town of Wexford... Here [he] concealed himself, and everybody was for a long time utterly ignorant as to his fate... At length, it occurred to certain of his friends, to seek him through the country... Their search was in vain, until approaching by chance the old castle, they became aware of a stench, which the seekers conjectured to proceed from the putrid corpse of murdered Waddy. On getting nearer this opinion was confirmed, for a dead body lay half within and half without the castle, which the descent of the portcullis had cut nearly into equal portions... [T]o their infinite astonishment, they perceived it was *not* Waddy, but a neighbouring priest who had been so expertly cut in two; how the accident had happened nobody could surmise... [T]he other half of the priest was discovered immediately within the entrance, but by no means in equally good condition with that outside; inasmuch as it appeared that numerous collops and rump-steaks had been cut off the reverend gentleman's hindquarters by Waddy who early one morning had found the priest thus divided; and being alike unable to raise the portcullis or get out to look for food, certain indeed, in the latter ease, of being piked by any of the rebels who knew him, he thought it better to feed on the priest, and remain in the castle till fortune smiled, than run a risk of breaking all his bones by dropping from the battlements, his only alternative.

It turns out, however, that Barrington, writing two decades after the event, was being his usual unreliable self. Contemporary accounts make it clear that there was no cannibalism involved. The castle at Clough East to which ultra-loyalist Richard Waddy, a prosecution witness in the trial of rebel leader Bagenal Harvey, fled was his own home. He was not starving. The priest was John Byrne, a Carmelite friar from Goff's Bridge near Taghmon who had been 'a very zealous and active rebel' in 1798. 'A drinking, giddy man', Byrne had been asked to leave Ferns diocese by his bishop during the Rising and threatened with suspension. How come in December 1799 he found himself at Waddy's table remains a mystery. An altercation between the two men followed an alcohol-fuelled dinner. It was said that Byrne, believing that he had killed his host, was trying to escape when Waddy let the portcullis that shielded him from intruders drop, virtually severing the friar's body. Next morning Waddy's servants found the corpse, and a few days later an inquest jury returned a verdict of 'accidental' on Byrne's death. So, for whatever reason, Barrington invented Richard Waddy's cannibalism.

What of the Great Irish Famine of the 1840s? The eminent U.S. historian Perry Curtis has commented that 'the silences surrounding cannibalism are almost deafening enough to arouse suspicion', while Professor Joe Lee of NYU noted in a lecture in the mid-1990s:

There was also of course a great deal of psychic decomposition, even right down to some cases of cannibalism, even, or especially, cannibalism in one's own family. It was, as far as we can tell, of the deranged, of those who were themselves victims, driven mad by hunger.

Metaphorical references, such as Thomas Carlyle's account of a gombeenman who had 'prospered ... by workhouse grocery-and-meal trade, by secret pawnbroking—by eating the slain', or John Mitchel's gothic depiction of the workhouse in *Glenties* as 'the fortress of Giant Despair, whereinto he draws them one by one, and devours them there', capture the horrors of the famine but prove nothing about cannibalism.

However, Mitchel's reference to 'insane mothers [who] began to eat their young children, who died of famine before them' is in a different league. Novelist William Carleton's *Red Hall*, later reissued as *The Black Baronet*, and *The Squanders of Castle Squander*, both novels written during the Great Famine, also refer to literal cannibalism:

...fathers have been known to make a wolfish meal upon the dead bodies of their own offspring. We might, therefore, be carried on our own description up to the very highest point of imaginable horror, without going beyond the truth.

On Saturday, the 25th inst., a tender and affectionate father, stuffed by so many cubic feet of cold wind, foul air, all resulting from extermination and the benevolence of a humane landlord, will, in the very wantonness of repletion, feed upon the dead body of his own child—for which entertaining

performance he will have the satisfaction, subsequently, of enacting with the success the interesting character of a felon, and be benevolently lodged in the gaol of the county.

The Squanders of Castle Squander devotes a few pages to describing a father who makes a meal of his dead son. It is likely, as Melissa Fegan notes, that this account (and possibly also Mitchel's claim) were inspired by press reports of one of two incidents involving corpse consumption in Galway a few years earlier, to which I now turn.

In May 1849 Rev. James Anderson, rector of Ballinrobe in County Mayo, wrote a long open letter to prime minister Lord John Russell, in the course of which he described a starving man who had extracted the heart and liver from a ship-wrecked corpse 'and *that* was the maddening feast on which he regaled himself and his family'. Anderson's letter was widely reported in the press and raised in the House of Commons by Henry Arthur Herbert, M.P. for Kerry.

Lord John felt compelled to reply in some detail to the charge of famine-induced cannibalism. In his statement to the House of Commons he revealed that the alleged incident had occurred the previous November in the Clifden union and claimed that the culprit was a well-fed labourer 'of singularly voracious appetite... not at all suffering from distress himself' (although two of his sisters were on relief). Initially, according to Russell, the 'cannibal' did not identify the corpse as human, but on being apprised of this by neighbours, 'it does not appear that he ate any portion of the flesh, whatever his original intention might have been'. Russell's disingenuous

statement was widely reported, and was the focus of a long rebuttal in the *Freeman's Journal* and a further letter from Rev. Anderson. The *Freeman's* protested that the only detail on which Anderson had erred was on 'the eating of the putrid heart', and took particular exception to Russell's assertion that 'the Clifden cannibal', one Patrick Diamond, was well fed or, as claimed by the London *Times*, 'a fat man':

Patrick Diamond, the fat labourer, must be as great a curiosity as the extinct *Dodo*. We believe he is the only man of his race on whom a pound of Indian meal per diem has raised the thick coat of fat which gives the *Times* the power of triumphant refutation. Such miraculous obesity cut away the ground from the Rev. Mr. Anderson, and raises the presumption that all the Irish are shamming... But, after all, it did appear that Diamond did cut out the heart—nay more, that this 'fat and well-fed labourer' did meditate the eating thereof until he was told, what his eyes must plainly have told him before, that the trunk was that of a human body! This could not well be got over, and how is it explained? Well, by another fact of equal singularity with the fabulous fatness—that Diamond had a most voracious appetite, and of such abnormal irregularity, that he would devour rank weeds or green grass to satisfy its enormous cravings! We leave this satisfactory explanation untouched. Is there a human being, Lord John and the *Times* inclusive, who believes it?

Which is the less plausible, Patrick Diamond's girth or his failure to distinguish the corpse as human? James Anderson was firmly convinced that

Diamond knew what he was doing, and the Catholic curate of Spiddal reassured Anderson that he had told 'a tale, alas, too familiar here'. But what actually transpired is perhaps rather lost in the 'spin' of the different reports.

Another instance, the likely inspiration for Carleton's account, is harder to discredit. It refers to a second Connemara man, one John Connelly, who had been convicted of stealing sheep and sentenced to three months hard labour, since 'an end should be put to such practices or that no man's property could be safe'. The sentence prompted a resident magistrate to intervene:

Mr. Dopping, Resident magistrate, stood up and addressing the Court said, that he felt bound to explain to the Court that he knew of this case. He had been told that the prisoner and his family were starving when this offence had been committed. One of his children had died and he had been credibly informed that the mother ate part of its legs and feet after its death. He had the body exhumed and found that nothing but the bones remained of its legs and feet. A thrill of horror pervaded the court at this announcement. There was deep silence for several minutes, during which time many a tear trickled down the cheeks of those present. Even the court wept. The prisoner was instantly discharged.

It is important to remember that the evidence on famine cannibalism is often untrustworthy. On the one hand, it is not always easy to distinguish between what can be attested and what seems plausible. Legal and standard documentary sources may sway us more readily than folk memory

or biblical narratives. But is it fair to dismiss the latter as mere rhetorical devices?

On the other hand, the relative 'silence' on cannibalism in Ireland during the 1840s is no proof that it did not happen. The taboo against cannibalism meant that, when and if it occurred, it would have been furtive, all traces hidden by the perpetrators. And the same taboo would have inhibited others from recalling it. William Carleton's expressed unease about portraying cannibalism in *Castle Squander*, even though 'six or seven such scenes occurred in Ireland during the last four years', is interesting in this respect. Folklore about the Great Famine contains no evidence or even hints of it, although it is rife with mentions of famine foods, familiar and unfamiliar. But perhaps folk memory's silence on human meat as famine food reflected twentieth-century sensitivities rather than nineteenth-century realities?

Yet the hard evidence for both corpse consumption and murder-cannibalism in conditions of extreme famine in both twentieth-century Russia and China, and in the micro-historic anecdotes outlined at the outset of this talk, lend more credence to earlier less well-documented assertions.

But this is a place where, inevitably, empirical history must take a back seat.

In their sympathy for the accused, John Dopping and those who wept in the courtroom showed a better understanding of famine than those who would seek to deny the possibility of famine cannibalism. And echoes of Dopping's sentiments are to be found elsewhere. In Moscow in 1922 an officially sanctioned exhibition close to the Kremlin highlighted the urgency of

an ongoing famine with gruesome photographs. Communist Party newspapers carried reports of cannibalism for their shock value, and a poster on display in Moscow read 'these people who eat their dead because they are hungry are not cannibals; the cannibals are those who do not give their surplus to the hungry'. Again, towards the end of World War 2 in New Guinea some Japanese troops, prohibited from surrendering and cut off from food supply chains, resorted to cannibalism. In Kazuo Hara's 1987 disturbing documentary about that period, 'The Emperor's Naked Army Marches On', former soldier Kenzo Okuzaki more than once states that he did not condemn the perpetrators, but 'those who put them in that situation'.

All these accounts of cannibalism are unsettling, but they are useful reminders of the sheer horror of true famine. This is perhaps sometimes lost in the awareness and marketing campaigns of NGOs, who tend to confuse images of malnutrition, which remains endemic in poor countries, for the stark horrors of famine itself. The graphic images of famine produced by nineteenth-century NGOs and others capture the horrors of famine more faithfully than the often softened and feminized images familiar to us. The famous woodcuts circulated by the China Famine Relief Fund in 1878 and Willoughby Wallace Cooper's photographs of famine victims in Madras taken around the same time are troubling cases in point.

Or could it be that the famines that we witness today through the lens of NGOs and the media are less horrific than those in Moldova or Madras? Cannibalism is a historical reality missing in the most recent famines in Africa. This could be due to what followers of Norbert Elias would call the civilizing

process, but it could also be—and I believe this to be the more plausible explanation—because those recent famines are not so apocalyptic by global historical standards.