

William Carleton and Famine

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Carleton is the pre-eminent chronicler of famine in Ireland – not just what we now term *the* Famine, the Great Famine of 1845-52, but the perennial state of famine afflicting Ireland in the early nineteenth century.¹ Famine conditions are pervasive throughout *Traits and Stories of the Irish Peasantry*. The Lough Derg Pilgrim is diverted from his planned career in the church due to his outrage at the avarice and indifference of a priest who demands money for confession from an old man and his emaciated son, newly recovered from famine fever. Their pilgrimage has been undertaken in thanksgiving for the recovery of this fragile youth – his brother and sister did not survive. They are left with no money to feed themselves on the return home, but the priest has no sympathy: ‘it is the common story!’ he says, later telling the narrator ‘I’m not to be duped with such tales as you’ve heard.’² ‘The Poor Scholar’ describes the effects of famine and fever: ‘hundreds [...] lay huddled together in cold cabins, in out-houses, and even behind ditches [...]. The number of interments that took place daily in the parish was awful; nothing could be seen but funerals attended by groups of ragged and emaciated creatures, from whose hollow eyes gleamed forth the wolfish fire of famine.’³ In Jemmy’s case, it is only the hospitality and generosity of his fellow victims that keeps him alive, including Paddy Dunn, a ‘naked, starved-looking man’, who describes himself as ‘the next thing to my own ghost’.⁴ These stories of the 1820s and 1830s, looking back to earlier famines of 1817 and 1822, encapsulate many of the iconic images that

¹ I have written about Carleton and the Famine elsewhere, including *Literature and the Irish Famine, 1845-1919* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), “‘Something so utterly unprecedented in the annals of human life’: William Carleton and the Great Famine”, in Peter Gray (ed.), *Victoria’s Ireland?: Ireland and Britishness, 1837-1901* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2004), and ‘Representations of the Great Famine in Literature, 1845-1885’ in Julia M. Wright, *A Companion to Irish Literature*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Blackwell, 2010).

² William Carleton, ‘The Lough Derg Pilgrim’, *Traits and Stories of the Irish Peasantry*, 2 vols. (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe Ltd.; Savage, Maryland: Barnes & Noble, 1990), I 266-7.

³ William Carleton, ‘The Poor Scholar’, *Traits and Stories of the Irish Peasantry*, II 299-300.

⁴ ‘The Poor Scholar’, p. 311.

were to become indelibly associated with the Great Famine: the refusal to believe that such suffering could really exist; whole families dying of starvation and fever in isolated cabins, or even ditches; endless funerals – and eventually mass graves, where a grave was procured at all; living skeletons, or victims driven mad by grief and hunger. Carleton highlights, as he was to do again in his preface to *The Black Prophet: A Tale of Irish Famine*, that famine was endemic in so-called pre-famine Ireland:

Much for instance is said, and has been said, concerning what are termed ‘Years of Famine,’ but it is not generally known, that since the introduction of the potato into this country, no year has ever passed which, in some remote locality or other, has not been such to the unfortunate inhabitants.⁵

Indeed, there had been fourteen partial or complete potato failures in Ireland between 1816 and 1842.⁶

Several of the stories are severely critical of the practice of exportation during a famine, an issue which was controversial during the later Famine, and ever since. ‘The Poor Scholar’, first published in 1833, deplores the fact that while Irish peasants are driven to steal milk or survive on blood boiled with oatmeal, ‘the very country thus groaning under such a terrible sweep of famine is actually pouring from all her ports a profusion of food, day after day; flinging it from her fertile bosom, with the wanton excess of a prodigal oppressed by abundance.’⁷ ‘Phil Purcel, the Pig-Driver’, also first published in 1833, is savagely satiric of the ideology of progress, which has brought to Ireland only ‘the improvements of poverty, sickness and famine’, and harsh lessons in political economy and free trade:

When either a man or a nation starves, it is a luxury to starve in an enlightened manner; and nothing is more consolatory to a person acquainted with public rights

⁵ William Carleton, *The Black Prophet: A Tale of Irish Famine* (London and Belfast: Simms & M‘Intyre, 1847; reproduced Poole and Herndon, VA: Woodstock Books and Cassell Academic, 1996), p. 248.

⁶ R. F. Foster, *Modern Ireland 1600-1972* (London: Penguin, 1988), p. 320.

⁷ ‘The Poor Scholar’, *Traits and Stories*, II 306-7.

and constitutional privileges, than to understand those liberal principles upon which he fasts and goes naked.⁸

John Bull's greed is to blame, and the narrator warns that he may not have the sole enjoyment of Irish provisions for long:

But it is very condescending in John to eat our beef and mutton; and as he happens to want both, it is particularly disinterested in him to encourage us in the practice of self-denial. It is possible, however, that we may ultimately refuse to banquet by proxy on our own provisions; and that John may not be much longer troubled to eat for us in that capacity.⁹

The tone is not only reminiscent of Swift's 'Modest Proposal', but forecasts the revolutionary language of John Mitchel a decade later. During the Great Famine, Irish writers were mobilised into political positions they might not otherwise have held: Carleton's friend Samuel Ferguson joined the Protestant Repeal Association due to his conviction a local legislature would have prevented much of the suffering and death; Jane Francesca Elgee, the future Lady Wilde, incited rebellion in her poems in *The Nation*, and almost ended up on sedition charges when she edited *The Nation* while Duffy was in jail; Carleton's colleague at the *Dublin University Magazine* and *The Nation*, the other-worldly translator James Clarence Mangan, became the foremost poet of the Famine, and wrote a public letter of support to John Mitchel, offering 'to go all lengths with you [...] for the achievement of our national independence', before his miserable death in 1849.¹⁰ The liberal Conservative Carleton does not take up such extreme positions; he remains vehemently anti-Repeal, in spite of his clear-eyed portrayal of the negative effects of the Union. It is possible that his personal experience of earlier famines, which led him to perceive this new onset of famine as normal rather than apocalyptic, set him apart from his metropolitan peers. But he consistently challenges those

⁸ William Carleton, 'Phil Purcel, the Pig-Driver', *Traits and Stories of the Irish Peasantry*, I 408.

⁹ 'Phil Purcel, the Pig-Driver', p. 410.

¹⁰ James Clarence Mangan, *United Irishman*, 25 March 1848, 106.

who had the power to eradicate famine conditions, and defends the victims against the charges of ingratitude and reckless violence, and as an established authority on peasant life he felt he had a right to be listened to.

Famine was so integral to the Irish condition that it transcends the literal for Carleton, becoming a metaphor for cultural and intellectual impoverishment. In his 1842 'General Introduction' to *Traits and Stories*, Carleton compares the state of Irish literature when he began to write to exportation during a famine:

During some of the years of Irish famine, such were the unhappy circumstances of the country, that she was exporting provisions of every description in the most prodigal abundance, which the generosity of England was sending back again for our support. So was it with literature. Our men and women of genius uniformly carried their talents to the English market, whilst we laboured at home under all the dark privations of a literary famine.¹¹

Unlike Carleton, determined to stay at home and revive his country's publishing industry, other Irish writers, such as Thomas Moore, Lady Morgan, Gerald Griffin and John Banim headed to London like absentees or migrant workers, to be fêted or starved, leaving their country 'utterly destitute of a national literature'. Ireland's 'native intellect', meant for 'home consumption', was instead exported, while Ireland was 'forced to subsist upon the scanty supplies which could be procured from the sister kingdom.'¹²

Famine and exportation become the litmus-test of the integrity of the Union for Carleton, but also expose the deep fissures within Irish society, particularly between landlord and tenant, but also between clergy and people, merchants and customers, even between neighbours or family members. In his pre-Famine works, Carleton presents vulnerability to famine as a consequence of the breakdown of the vital relationship of landlord and tenant. In

¹¹ William Carleton, 'General Introduction', *Traits and Stories of the Irish Peasantry*, I v.

¹² 'General Introduction', p. v.

‘Tubber Derg’, landlords are rather luridly castigated as ‘vile and heartless’ absentees, supping on turtle and venison while their tenants starve.¹³ The poor widow Rosha in that story says of her landlord: ‘I wouldn’t know where to find mine, if one sight of him ’ud save me an’ my childhre from the grave!’¹⁴ Proud, industrious Owen M’Carthy is brought down by the twin calamities of the agricultural downturn after the end of the war in 1814, and the 1817 famine, which reduces his family to ‘gaunt skeletons’.¹⁵ His appeal to the landlord falls on deaf ears, and the agent maliciously evicts him as a trouble-maker. The M’Carthy’s are pauperised, and in the absence of the Poor Law or tenant right become ‘an additional burden upon the country, which might easily have been avoided’.¹⁶ Little wonder, the narrator argues, that even honest men were driven to secret societies, agrarian outrage and assassination, and he warns that if Irish landlords do not take heed and reduce their rents then ‘poverty, famine, crime, and vague political speculations, founded upon idle hopes of a general transfer of property, will spread over and convulse the kingdom’.¹⁷

In *Valentine M’Clutchy*, published on the very eve of the Famine, the narrator argues the ‘two great curses of Ireland are bad Landlords and bad Agents, and in nineteen cases out of every twenty, the origin of the crime lies with the Landlord or Agent, instead of the tenant’.¹⁸ This novel, set in 1804, also reflects a time of famine, and again links it with the Union; Tom Topertoe becomes Lord Cumber by accepting a bribe to vote for the Union, and his arms depict a man standing on the neck of ‘a famine struck woman, surrounded by naked and starving children’.¹⁹ It also presciently raises the issue of unscrupulous proselytising during famines.

¹³ William Carleton, ‘Tubber Derg; or, The Red Well’, *Traits and Stories*, II 373, 385

¹⁴ ‘Tubber Derg’, p. 368

¹⁵ ‘Tubber Derg’, p. 373

¹⁶ ‘Tubber Derg’, p. 383

¹⁷ ‘Tubber Derg’, pp. 372-3, 382.

¹⁸ *Valentine M’Clutchy, The Irish Agent; or, Chronicles of the Castle Cumber Property*, 3 vols. (Dublin: James Duffy; London: Chapman and Hall; Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1845), I viii.

¹⁹ *Valentine M’Clutchy*, II 293-4.

Carleton's choice of a prophecy man for the villain of his best known work about famine, *The Black Prophet*, is curiously apt, in part because the Great Famine was the major event that would sweep away such figures. Carleton's preface to his collection *Tales and Sketches*, dated 16 June 1845, predicts that: 'several of the originals, who sat for their portraits here presented, were the last of their class which the country will ever again produce'.²⁰ One of these doomed characters is the Prophecy Man, described as 'he who solely devotes himself to an anxious observation of those political occurrences which mark the signs of the times, as they bear upon the future, the principal business of whose life it is to associate them with his own prophetic theories'.²¹ In a sense, Carleton is a kind of prophecy man; his story 'Barney M'Haigney, The Irish Prophecy Man' refers to the prophet of the Black Stone, 'who always prophesies backwards, and foretells what has happened.'²² In *The Black Prophet*, with its sinister Grey Stone, Carleton also 'foretells what has happened'; he looks back to the famines of 1817 and 1822 to describe what will happen now. All of his work to date seems to have been predicting this disaster as the ultimate consequence of neglect and mismanagement – and yet he seems, initially at least, to miss the significance of what is happening. Malcolm Brown, like many others underestimating Carleton's intellect and overestimating his peasant status, argues that he was simply incapable of understanding the enormity of what was happening: 'beyond communicating the raw feel of human pain, Carleton's peasant brain had trouble seizing the meaning of the catastrophe.'²³ In fact, *The Black Prophet* arises from the depth of social knowledge submerged in his works. When the novel first began to appear in the *Dublin University Magazine* in May 1846, there had only been the partial blight of 1845, and no sign that the destruction would recur. Even when

²⁰ William Carleton, *Tales and Sketches Illustrating the Character, Usages, Traditions, Sports and Pastimes of The Irish Peasantry* (Dublin: James Duffy, 1845), p. viii.

²¹ William Carleton, 'Barney M'Haigney, The Irish Prophecy Man', *Tales and Sketches*, p. 207.

²² 'Barney M'Haigney, The Irish Prophecy Man', p. 214.

²³ Malcolm Brown, *The Politics of Irish Literature From Thomas Davis to W. B. Yeats* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1972), p. 92.

Carleton wrote his polemical ‘Preface’ to *The Black Prophet* in February 1847, he could foresee that there would be great hardship due to the unexpected second failure in 1846, and he knew from his own experience that disease would follow, but he could not have predicted the low yield of 1847, or the failure of 1848. The Great Famine did not exist as a concept when Carleton began to write *The Black Prophet*; for Carleton, this was simply the latest in a long line of failures – a fact made clear by the non-specific subtitle, *A Tale of Irish Famine*. As far as he was concerned, this famine, like those earlier famines, would soon be forgotten, and he needed to seize this opportunity to make literary, political and financial capital from it: ‘National inflictions of this kind pass away, and are soon forgotten by every one but those with whom they have left their melancholy memorials.’²⁴ Cormac Ó Gráda concurs: ‘Ironically, had the potato famine of 1845 lasted just one year, it would have merited no more than a few paragraphs in the history books.’²⁵

The Black Prophet was an act of consciousness-raising, and a challenge to current calls for the Irish to be grateful for government relief. The novel’s political critique is explicitly spelt out by Carleton in his preface to the one-volume edition published by Simms and M‘Intyre in 1847, and in his dedication to Lord John Russell, pointedly referred to as ‘Prime Minister of Great Britain *and* Ireland’ [my emphasis]. This is ‘an Irish book’, Carleton says, ‘written upon an exclusively Irish subject’, but he makes it clear that these conditions have been created by the British government:

I cannot help thinking that the man who, in his Ministerial capacity, must be looked upon as a public exponent of those principles of Government which have brought our country to her present calamitous condition, by a long course of illiberal legislation and unjustifiable neglect, ought to have his name placed before a story which details

²⁴ *The Black Prophet*, p. vi.

²⁵ Cormac Ó Gráda, *Ireland Before and After the Famine: Explorations in Economic History, 1800-1925* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), p. 5.

with truth the sufferings which such legislation and neglect have entailed upon our people.²⁶

The memory of the legislature being particularly ‘faithless’, the purpose of such naming and shaming is to persuade Russell to ‘put it out of the power of any succeeding author ever to write another’ Tale of Irish Famine. In particular, he highlights once again the refusal of the government to ban exportation:

Such, indeed, was the extraordinary fact! Day after day, vessels laden with Irish provisions, drawn from a population perishing with actual hunger, as well as with the pestilence which it occasioned, were passing out of our ports, whilst, singular as it may seem, other vessels came in freighted with our own provisions, sent back, through the charity of England, to our relief.²⁷

Yet Carleton is fairly even-handed in his condemnation of a wide range of groups he blames for exacerbating the suffering. Given the tongue-lashing Carleton meted out to landlords, middlemen and agents in previous stories and novels, one might expect something similar in this novel, yet he is oddly restrained in *The Black Prophet*; the landlord is an absentee drawing around £32,000 a year from the estate, and sends only £100 for the relief of distress – which Carleton footnotes ‘A recent fact’; yet the narrator describes him as ‘not, in many respects, a bad [landlord]’.²⁸ Middlemen comprise ‘one of the worst and most cruel systems that ever cursed either the country or the people’;²⁹ yet Dick o’ the Grange, with his touching relationship with his servant Jemmy Branigan, is one of the few comic figures in the novel, and his son Young Dick is more dupe than villain. The agent, Mr Travers, is harsh but fair, and helps restore prosperity at the end of the novel; indeed, John Kelly comments: ‘In terms of Irish agrarian life in the early nineteenth century, Travers is perhaps hardly less

²⁶ *The Black Prophet*, ‘Dedication’.

²⁷ *The Black Prophet*, p. 214.

²⁸ *The Black Prophet*, p. 280.

²⁹ *The Black Prophet*, p. 101.

miraculous and believable than the prophetic dreams and amazing coincidences that settle the murder-plot'.³⁰

The full weight of Carleton's condemnation in fact falls within the rural community, particularly on two groups: the 'vast number of strong farmers, with bursting granaries and immense haggards' who hold back their provisions until a year of scarcity when prices are high; and a 'still viler class', the 'hard-hearted and well-known misers' who 'prey upon the distress and destitution of the poor'.³¹ Darby Skinadre 'the very Genius of Famine',³² is so repulsive a figure that the *Athenaeum* felt compelled to dedicate its review of the novel to the defence of meal-dealers, asserting against common reason that: 'There is no class of men that suffers more severely, and in general more undeservedly, than provision-dealers in a season of scarcity'.³³ But Carleton does not restrict his condemnation to such as Darby; death and suffering are consequences of a wider failure of communal responsibility. Peggy Murtagh dies in Darby's shop, but the cause of her death is ambiguous: 'whether from a broken heart, caused by sin, shame, and desertion, or from famine and the pressure of general destitution and distress, could never properly be ascertained.'³⁴ Abandoned by her lover, rejected by her parents, Peggy has no refuge from starvation; Sarah prevents Tom Dalton from murdering Darby to revenge Peggy by persuading him: 'it wasn't he but yourself that starved her and her child. Who deserted her – who brought her to shame an' to sorrow in her own heart and in the eyes of the world?'³⁵

³⁰ John Kelly, 'Introduction' to *The Black Prophet*.

³¹ *The Black Prophet*, pp. 213-14.

³² *The Black Prophet*, p. 70.

³³ *Athenaeum*, 13 March 1847, p. 279. Carleton had offered a much more sympathetic representation of the miser in *Fardorougha the Miser* (1839), notably linking Fardorougha's hoarding with a terror of famine. The embodiment of the famine in a single figure also recurs in *Castle Squander* (1852), in the grotesque agent Greasy Pockets, 'an ogre in disguise' who feeds on both tenants and landlords (I 265), and in the aged man of 'Fair Gurtha; or, The Hungry Grass' (1856), who is also described as 'the very genius of famine' (*Dublin University Magazine*, April 1856, p. 419).

³⁴ *The Black Prophet*, p. 94.

³⁵ *The Black Prophet*, p. 265.

Carleton seems to be inaugurating in this novel several motifs and scenes that recur in later novels representing the Famine, in particular the discovery of dying victims in a lonely cabin, and the female famine victim, desperately attempting to save her children.³⁶ Nelly rejects the appeal of ‘a poor famine-struck looking woman, with three or four children, the very pictures of starvation and misery’, telling her: ‘We’re poor ourselves, and we can’t help every one that comes to us. It’s not for you now.’ Sarah contradicts this: ‘Don’t you know that’s a lie? [...] You have it if you wish to give it. [...] If every one treated the poor that way, what would become of them?’³⁷ There is a pointed didactic message here for Carleton’s contemporary readers, who still had a chance to make a difference, as when both heroines risk their lives to help the sick and the dying: ‘Think of how many poor sthrangers is lyin’ in ditches an’ in barns, an’ in outhouses,’ Sarah says. ‘Isn’t it a shame, then, for me, an’ the likes o’ me, that has health an’ strength, an’ nothin’ to do, to see my fellow-creatures dyin’ on all hands about me, for want of the very assistance that I can afford them.’³⁸

In a chapter tellingly titled ‘A Picture for the Present’ – the priest and Nelly enter a cabin, to find a mother and her three children; the little girl is dead, the boy is starving, and the dying baby is desperately trying to suckle from its mother. The mother’s body is forensically described, like a pre-mortem autopsy: the ‘shrunk upper forehead’, ‘sharp cheek-bones’, ‘the ridge of her thin, wasted nose’, ‘her skeleton arms, pointed elbows, and long-jointed fingers’, her ‘eyeballs protruded even to sharpness’. Worst of all is her expression: there seemed a fierce demand in her eye that would have been painful, were it not that it was occasionally tamed down into something mournful and imploring by a recollection of the helpless beings that were about her. Stripped, as she then was, of all that civilized society presents to a human being on the bed of death – without

³⁶ Margaret Kelleher argues that ‘in the majority of famine representations [...] the victim of famine who is the subject of a detailed description, is female’. *The Feminization of Famine: Expressions of the Inexpressible?* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press; Cork: Cork University Press, 1997), p. 6.

³⁷ *The Black Prophet*, pp. 131-2.

³⁸ *The Black Prophet*, p. 259.

friends, aid of any kind, comfort, sympathy, or the consolations of religion – she might be truly said to have sunk to the mere condition of animal life [...].³⁹

Carleton says in his preface that the ‘principal interest’ of his novel was not ‘so gloomy a topic as famine’ but ‘the workings of those passions and feelings which usually agitate human life’;⁴⁰ but he demonstrates in this novel, as later in the more graphic scenes of squalor and cannibalism in *Castle Squander* and *Red Hall; or the Baronet’s Daughter*, how swiftly famine and disease strip their victims down to mere ‘animal life’, and how callously ‘civilised society’ ignores their needs.

It has often been remarked that the sensational murder plot of *The Black Prophet* seems incidental to the famine, but as James H. Murphy has recently argued, ‘plot and famine are connected at a deeper level through the notion of providence. [...] The novel invokes a hermeneutic of suspicion on all attempts to depict the future as foreclosed or predestined, whether positively or negatively.’⁴¹ Peter Gray has shown that the belief the Famine was providential was pervasive, even among Government officials; the Home Secretary, Sir James Graham, wrote to the Prime Minister, Sir Robert Peel, in October 1845:

The sword, the pestilence, and famine are the instruments of [the Almighty’s] displeasure; [...] he gives the word: a single crop is blighted; and we see a nation prostrate, stretching out its hands for bread. These are solemn warnings, and they fill me with reverence; they proclaim with a voice not to be mistaken, that ‘doubtless there is a God, who judgeth the Earth’.⁴²

The narrator of *The Black Prophet* initially seems to encourage this reading, describing the starving as ‘like creatures changed from their very humanity by some judicial plague that had

³⁹ *The Black Prophet*, p. 387.

⁴⁰ *The Black Prophet*, p. vii.

⁴¹ James H. Murphy, *Irish Novelists and the Victorian Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 56.

⁴² Peter Gray, *Famine, Land and Politics: British Government and Irish Society 1843-50* (Dublin and Portland, OR.: Irish Academic Press, 1999), p. 99.

been sent down from heaven to punish and desolate the land'.⁴³ Like the people of Glen Dhu, the reader is led to believe that the Daltons' decline and fall into poverty and then starvation and sickness is punishment for a murder committed by the head of the family twenty years before: 'it became too certain to be doubted, that the slow but sure finger of God's justice was laid upon them as an additional proof that crime, however it may escape the laws of men, cannot veil itself from the all-seeing eye of the Almighty.'⁴⁴ However, suspicion is roused by the use of this providential explanation by Darby Skinadre, who thereby justifies his exploitation of his clients: 'the thruth is, we have brought all these scourges on us by our sins and our thransgressions; thim that sins, Jemmy, must suffer.'⁴⁵ While the ultimate unmasking of Donnel Dhu and the return to prosperity of the Daltons has an undoubted providential flavour, Carleton resolutely challenges the contemporary providential ideology of the famine.

The Black Prophet was generally well-received, and at least one English reader was moved to send money through Carleton to the relief fund;⁴⁶ but, unsurprisingly, if Carleton's ambition was to affect legislation so as to assuage the suffering in the present, or prevent famine in the future, he failed. Perhaps the ultimate sign of his failure was the uncanny repetition in *The Squanders of Castle Squander* (1852) of the scenes of eviction Carleton had described in 1845 in *Valentine M'Clutchy*. Carleton initially refers to *Valentine M'Clutchy* to compare his fictional eviction to (real life) evictions on the Blake estate in Connaught:

an extermination so miraculously parallel to it in every circumstance, even – as far as we can recollect – to the very Festival on which both occurred, that it would almost seem as if the exterminators alluded to had gone with "Valentine M'Clutchy" in their

⁴³ *The Black Prophet*, p. 250.

⁴⁴ *The Black Prophet*, p. 139.

⁴⁵ *The Black Prophet*, pp. 74-5.

⁴⁶ D. J. O'Donoghue, *The Life of William Carleton: Being His Autobiography and Letters; And an Account of His Life and Writings, From the Point at Which the Autobiography Breaks Off*, 2 vols. (London: Downey & Co., 1896), II 86.

hands, in order to perform – act by act – the identical scenes recorded in it, precisely as if they had previously rehearsed them from it.⁴⁷

He later inserts fifteen pages from *Valentine M'Clutchy*, describing the eviction of the O'Regans, into *Castle Squander*, because 'it may stand for a general diorama of what has taken place within the last six or eight years'.⁴⁸ The slippage from fictional eviction in *Valentine M'Clutchy*, to real-life eviction on the Blake estate, to fictional eviction in *Castle Squander*, vindicates Carleton's claims to authentic representation; *Castle Squander* 'presents a very truthful picture of both the past and present condition of Irish life and society', he says in the preface.⁴⁹ But it also suggests nothing has changed in fifty years, despite Carleton's efforts; if writers are, in Shelley's phrase, the 'unacknowledged legislators of the World',⁵⁰ Carleton had been unacknowledged in a very different sense. In the nightmarish blurring of life and art, it is almost as if *Valentine M'Clutchy*, far from preventing such scenes from happening again, had merely provided a blueprint.

In one sense he had finally been acknowledged: in 1848, after a long campaign, Carleton was awarded a government pension, and Sophia Hillan King suggests while it 'would be an overstatement to say that the pension silenced him' as an outspoken critic of the government, 'in effect something of the kind happened.'⁵¹ However, in *The Emigrants of Ahadarra* (1848) (admittedly, completed before his pension was awarded), in spite of a more cautious preface that the one attached to *The Black Prophet* – 'I have not presumed to dictate to the legislator, nor to make suggestions to the mere politician'⁵² – he continues to criticise anti-Irish legislation, including the recent act for extra relief of able-bodied paupers: 'an act

⁴⁷ William Carleton, *The Squanders of Castle Squander*, 2 vols. (London: Illustrated London Library, 1852), II 102.

⁴⁸ *Castle Squander*, II 215.

⁴⁹ *Castle Squander*, I iii-iv.

⁵⁰ Percy Bysshe Shelley, 'A Defence of Poetry', in Stephen Greenblatt (ed.), *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, vol. 2 (8th edn) (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006), p. 850.

⁵¹ Sophia Hillan King, "'Pictures Drawn from Memory": William Carleton's Experience of Famine', *The Irish Review*, 17/18 (Winter, 1995), p. 87

⁵² William Carleton, *The Emigrants of Ahadarra: A Tale of Irish Life* (London and Belfast: Simms & McIntyre, 1848), p. v.

which, instead of being termed a Relief Act, ought to be called an act for the ruin of the country and the confiscation of property, both of which, if not repealed, it will ultimately accomplish.⁵³ He puts into the mouth of the landlord Chevydale an attack on the government for making Irish interests subservient to English interests.⁵⁴ *Emigrants* was of course also topical due to its representation of pre-Famine emigration, which provides another opportunity for a glance at the present: emigration is ‘a kind of depletion which no country can bear long’ and ‘is, at the moment we are writing this, progressing at a rate beyond all precedent’.⁵⁵ The long list of causes includes absenteeism, sub-letting, exorbitant rents, reliance on the potato, and political corruption; but Carleton denies that surplus population is an issue:

it is a grievous anomaly to reflect that a country so far steeped in misery and destitution as to have nearly one-half of its population in a state of most pitiable pauperism, possesses a soil capable of employing and maintaining three times the number of its inhabitants.⁵⁶

So Carleton is not silenced when it comes to criticism of the government; nor was he silenced on the issue of famine, however tempting it might have been to turn to a different theme. Carleton was to discover that English readers had tired of gloomy Irish subjects. The London publisher Maxwell declined to publish a Carleton novel in 1850, telling him that ‘the Irish are not able to buy it, and the English will not’, and making the bizarre suggestion that Carleton should move to Lancashire and ‘devote his gifts to English subjects’.⁵⁷ James Duffy, the notable survivor among Irish publishers, many of whom, including Carleton’s early publisher William Curry jr., had gone bankrupt during the Famine, warned Carleton in 1855: ‘The people seldom think of buying books, because they are luxuries, which they can

⁵³ *Emigrants*, p. 267.

⁵⁴ *Emigrants*, p. 288.

⁵⁵ *Emigrants*, p. 86.

⁵⁶ *Emigrants*, p. 88.

⁵⁷ O’Donoghue, *Life*, II 176-7.

do without.’⁵⁸ And yet Carleton persisted in writing Irish novels, and in referring to the gloomy subject of famine.

If Carleton is not silenced on the subject of famine in his fiction, he is oddly reticent in writing about it elsewhere. Christopher Morash notes that ‘the exclusion of the famines of 1817 and 1822 from Carleton’s *Autobiography* (which covers the period up to approximately 1827) is an eloquent testimony of silence to his distance from the world of the starving in rural Ireland’.⁵⁹ When Carleton revisited the Clogher Valley during the Famine, he was accompanying John Birney, dedicatee of the first series of *Traits and Stories*, who was on his way to collect rents from his property there; when he sees Ballyscally, ‘now a scene of perfect desolation’, it is in the company of the gentleman who had razed seventy or eighty cottages there to the ground: ‘Every unfortunate tenant had been evicted, driven out, to find a shelter for himself where he could’.⁶⁰ Instead of offering a diatribe against such cruelty, Carleton quickly diverts our attention to the only house remaining, the house of his first love, Anne Duffy, and her husband. Carleton is now the intimate of landlords and exterminators, and while the Famine is everywhere in his fiction, he shies away from it in reality.

Perhaps fiction provides a catalyst, a safe space for the expression of traumatic experience. Carleton may not have suffered directly during the Famine (beyond the loss of his daughters to emigration), but his friend Samuel Ferguson reflects in his poem ‘Dublin’ the enormous effect of the mere act of witnessing the Famine: ‘Here men of feeling, ere they yet grow old, / Die of the very horrors they behold.’⁶¹ D. J. O’Donoghue, commenting on *The Tithe Proctor* (1849), suggests that Carleton was: ‘much disturbed at this period’, and was perhaps suffering from ‘mental aberration’.⁶² If so, it is surely not a coincidence that this

⁵⁸ O’Donoghue, *Life*, II 215.

⁵⁹ Christopher Morash, *Writing the Irish Famine* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), p. 178.

⁶⁰ O’Donoghue, *Life*, I 57

⁶¹ Samuel Ferguson, ‘Dublin: A Poem. In Imitation of the Third Satire of Juvenal’, *Dublin University Magazine*, vol. 34, July 1849, p. 109.

⁶² O’Donoghue, *Life*, II 121

disturbance emerges in the wake of the horrors Carleton attested to in his fiction. The narrator of *Castle Squander*, Randy O’Rollick, peasant-born but now incorporated into the Squander household (it is altogether too tempting to see in this an analogy for the shift in Carleton’s own social position), is complicit in eviction in his role as under-agent yet tormented by ‘a sense of injustice that almost turned my sympathy into madness’.⁶³ Randy’s narrative ‘I’ shifts frequently into the authorial ‘we’, suggesting a shared outrage:

this deep *diapason* of wretchedness and sorrow grew into something so utterly unprecedented in the annals of human life, as the mingled mass of agony was borne past us upon the wild and pitiless blast, that we find ourselves absolutely incompetent even to describe it. We feel, however, as if that loud and multitudinous wail was still ringing in our ears, against which and the terrible recollections associated with it, we wish we could close them and the memory that brings them into fresh existence.⁶⁴

The powerful desire to forget – particularly on the part of the legislature – makes the painful duty to remember even more imperative. Objecting to the idea that those who survived the Famine tended to be silent about it, Declan Kiberd says that: ‘Occlusion, not silence, is the real condition of mid-nineteenth-century Ireland. [...] The traumatic scenes witnessed were bound to create a sort of denial in many who felt guilty simply for having survived a holocaust that left so many loved one dead.’⁶⁵ An example of this occlusion can be seen in the act of wish-fulfilment that spares the North of Ireland from famine in *Castle Squander*.⁶⁶ Tom Squander’s property luckily lies in an industrious Northern county, and even during the Famine his income is maintained. Henry Squander, also from the north, is in the end able to buy up his ancestral residence in the Encumbered Estates Court. On a visit to Henry’s home

⁶³ *Castle Squander*, II 95.

⁶⁴ *Castle Squander*, II 105.

⁶⁵ Declan Kiberd, *Irish Classics* (London: Granta, 2000), pp. 278-9.

⁶⁶ Christine Kinealy and Gerard Mac Atasney have written about the impact of the Famine in Ulster, and historiographical silence about it; see Gerard Mac Atasney, *This Dreadful Visitation: The Famine in Lurgan and Portadown* (Belfast: Beyond the Pale, 1997), and Christine Kinealy and Gerard Mac Atasney, *The Hidden Famine: Hunger, Poverty and Sectarianism in Belfast* (London and Sterling, VA: Pluto Press, 2000).

in Ulster, Randy is amazed at the contrast: ‘The trim hedges, the neat and clean culture, the superior dress, the sober and thoughtful demeanour, and the calm air of self-respect and independence which marked the inhabitants of the north, were such as could not for a moment be mistaken.’⁶⁷

The chronicler of Irish famine acknowledges in *Castle Squander* that the Great Famine is ‘utterly unprecedented’, and his only novel actually set during the Great Famine is also unprecedented. *Castle Squander* is Carleton’s only novel with a first-person narrator, and for the first time he tells the tale from within the enclave of the Big House. This is also his first time publishing exclusively in London. The title, and the narrator’s position as trusted (and conflicted) family servant of stereotypically spendthrift Irish landlords, are clear nods to Edgeworth’s *Castle Rackrent*, while as Murphy has noted, O’Rollick’s name is ‘an obvious reference to the popular conflation of rollicking and [Charles] Lever’s character Harry Lorrequer’.⁶⁸ *Castle Squander* is a reflection not only of fifty years of Irish life, but fifty years of Irish literature, which now seemed to be coming to an end. Considering the deaths of Banim and Griffin while writing his autobiography, Carleton identified himself as the ‘*ultimus Romanorum*’, predicting that after he was gone there would be ‘a lull, an obscurity’ until new writers emerged, ‘for in this manner the cycles of literature and taste appear, hold their day, displace each other, and make room for others’.⁶⁹

Both the form and the content of *Castle Squander* exhibit this awareness of cultural fragmentation. In a sense it isn’t a novel at all; O’Donoghue describes it as ‘a pamphlet.’⁷⁰ Jackie Turton adds it is ‘memorable, more because of its startling descent into textual incoherence than because of any literary merit it can claim’.⁷¹ The narrative is usurped by an

⁶⁷ *Castle Squander*, II 185.

⁶⁸ Murphy, *Irish Novelists in the Victorian Age*, p. 63.

⁶⁹ O’Donoghue, *Life*, II 293.

⁷⁰ O’Donoghue, *Life*, I 182.

⁷¹ Jacqueline Turton, *The Fiction and Fictionalising of William Carleton*, unpublished PhD thesis (University of Liverpool, 2007), p. 198.

intertextual collage of fictional and factual extracts from the *Dublin University Magazine*, Charles Trevelyan's *The Irish Crisis*, letters by Hancock and J. S. Mill, tables of figures from the Encumbered Estates Court, references to Dante's *Inferno*, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Defoe's *The Great Plague*, and Carleton's own *Valentine M'Clutchy*. But its very failure as a novel makes it, Christopher Morash argues, 'the characteristic Famine text', in that it exemplifies the impossibility of adequately representing atrocity; *Castle Squander*, he suggests, is 'an unwitting, unwilling postmodern text, beyond the comfort of formal closure in its struggle to present the unrepresentable.'⁷² *Castle Squander* charts a series of famines; Randy's employment begins in a year of 'severe famine', and he witnesses the excesses of Squire Squander's entertainments while 'so many of his fellow creatures, nay, of his own tenants, were literally perishing for want of food'.⁷³ But Carleton cannot end this novel, as he does *The Black Prophet*, with a resolution that sets all to order: "'Time, the consoler,'" passes not in vain even over the abodes of wretchedness and misery',⁷⁴ says the narrator in the conclusion of the earlier novel, but in *Castle Squander*, in spite of a reference to 'our three years' famine',⁷⁵ the novel ends without the certainty of the Famine, or at least the conditions that created it, being at an end at all.

In 1855 Carleton published *Willy Reilly and his Dear Cooleen Bawn*, which would become one of the most popular Irish novels of the 19th century.⁷⁶ Given the resistance of publishers to Irish melancholy after the Famine, this seems a canny move on Carleton's part; O'Donoghue says: 'To write a novel on this theme was to command success, for no Irish reader could repress a thrill of interest at the sight of the book'.⁷⁷ Critics are united in the opinion that *Willy Reilly* and the other novels of the 1850s were symptomatic of Carleton's

⁷² Morash, *Writing the Irish Famine*, pp. 186-7.

⁷³ *Castle Squander*, I 44.

⁷⁴ *The Black Prophet*, p. 452.

⁷⁵ *Castle Squander*, II 271.

⁷⁶ Robert Welch (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to Irish Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), p. 82

⁷⁷ O'Donoghue, *Life*, II 201.

creative decline; these are the ‘the novels of his decadence’, and when he began writing ‘such rubbish as *Willy Reilly*’, Yeats said, it was clear ‘he knew well he had written himself out’.⁷⁸ He had turned away from the source of his strength: his deep-rooted knowledge and understanding of Irish peasant existence in the nineteenth century. James Cahalan sees the retreat to the past in Carleton’s late novels as a refusal to confront the aftermath of the Famine: ‘Carleton remained frozen in pre-Famine Ireland and romanticized a mythical past in his later, forgettable books’.⁷⁹ However, even in *Willy Reilly*, famine is indelibly inscribed in the landscape; this novel, set in 1745, opens with an immediate and bitterly ironic contemporary reference:

Ireland, as our English readers ought to know, has always been a country teeming with abundance – a happy land, in which want, destitution, sickness and famine have never been felt or known, except through the mendacious misrepresentations of her enemies. The road we speak of was a proof of this; for it was evident to every observer that, in some season of superabundant food, the people, not knowing exactly how to dispose of their shilling loaves, took to paving the common roads with them, rather than they should be utterly useless. These loaves, in the course of time, underwent the process of petrification, but could not, nevertheless, be looked upon as wholly lost to the country. A great number of the Irish, within six of the last preceding years – that is, from ’46 to ’52 – took a peculiar fancy for them as food, which, we presume, caused their enemies to say that we then had hard times in Ireland. Be this as it may, it enabled the sagacious epicures who lived upon them to retire, in due course, to the delightful retreats of Skull and Skibbereen, and similar

⁷⁸ W. B. Yeats, ‘William Carleton [Review of *Stories from Carleton and The Red-Haired Man’s Wife*]’, in *Uncollected Prose by W. B. Yeats*, ed. John P. Frayne, vol. 1 (London: Macmillan and Co., 1970), pp. 144-5.

⁷⁹ James Cahalan, *The Irish Novel: A Critical History* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1983), p. 66.

asylums, there to pass the very short remainder of their lives in health, ease, and luxury.⁸⁰

He is referring, of course, to the controversial public works schemes which left a legacy of ruined and unfinished ‘famine roads’, and to two of the most notorious sites of famine mortality. Carleton the prophecy man prophecies backwards, seeing even in the roads of Ireland under the Penal Laws the spectre of the future Famine.

⁸⁰ William Carleton, *Willy Reilly and His Dear Cooleen Bawn, The Works of William Carleton*, vol. 1 (New York: P. F. Collier, n.d.), p. 6.