

## Book review forum I

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David P Nally, *Human Encumbrances: Political Violence and the Great Irish Famine*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2011; 368 pp.: 9780268036089, US\$38 (pbk).

### Guest editorial: Colonialism and the Irish Famine

**Introduced by:** Gerry Kearns, *National University of Ireland Maynooth, Ireland*

There are at least three sets of intellectual issues with which Nally engages in his book on the Irish Famine of 1845–1852. In the first place, Nally looks at how disasters are explained. Following the work on the social distribution of vulnerability (Blaikie et al., 1994; Sen, 1982), Nally looks at the longer-term effect of the colonial administration of Ireland and at the shorter-term management of the famine itself. In broad terms, Nally accepts that while the presence of a potato blight was to some extent an event from the realm of, admittedly humanly reorganized, nature, the famine itself was instead a matter of social and political choices, for grain that could have been used to feed humans was exported, or was used in distilling, or was fed to animals. Nally uses modern discussions of food security and food sovereignty to raise questions about the relations between commodification and food distribution.

Nally next takes up a debate within Irish history. In Irish history, one group of historians has tried to take the emotive charge out of Irish historical writing and develop instead a more dispassionate

approach. This approach termed itself revisionist and sought to replace bias with objectivity. Thus Edwards and Williams (1956) produced a collection of essays based upon primary research. The overall argument of the book was that the British management of the famine was limited by the prevailing ideas of the time in ways that made intervention almost literally unimaginable. To criticize the British for what they failed to do would be to judge them in the anachronistic court of modern conceptions. Objective history should, it was argued, conduct itself quite differently with a greater sensitivity to historical context. Ironically, one of the finest expositions of emotive history was published some years later when Cecil Woodham-Smith (1962) published a scathing account of the British indifference to Irish suffering during the Famine. The revisionist position ran the danger of censoring from Irish history any material that might be used to stoke anger against the British since it was feared that such emotive history found its most ready consumers among the folk who condoned, funded, or practiced violent republicanism. Nally follows Donnelly (1993) and Gray (1995) in providing a contextual and comparative reading of the Famine that is unafraid to acknowledge that it was actually novel to cultivate such extreme indifference to famine suffering in the name of economic liberalism.

A third set of issues that Nally raises relate to Foucault's analyses of governmentality (Dean, 1999) and subjectivation (Foucault 1988 [1984]). Foucault noted a way of governing that involved the management of populations through producing forms of self-reflection for individuals that led them to take care of themselves in ways which responded

to contexts for behaviour that were under political control. This is a central theme in Nally's book for he is concerned with the ways that the famine was produced through the British attempts to civilize the Irish on British terms, and then how the famine itself was used to deepen and further these projects of civility.

It is colonialism which links these three sets of intellectual tasks together. The colonial character of British administration produced the vulnerability of the Irish poor as a corollary of a certain structuring of the economy for the greater efficiency of the British economy. It was the colonial character of Irish society that the revisionist historians were so anxious to deny. Finally, it is to legitimate colonial rule that civility is required and cultivated. The commentaries below take up all these issues with Weis and Carmody having most to say about the production of social vulnerability, Kinealy and Cronin having most to say about revisionist historiography, and Samatar having most to say about projects of civility.

## Fear and loathing in Ireland: How politics contributed to the Great Famine

**Reviewed by:** Christine Kinealy, *Drew University, USA*

Clearly, this book is a valuable addition to Famine historiography. Placing the Irish Famine in a theoretical framework – primarily famine theory and post-colonial studies – is still rare and exciting. I also welcomed the fact that Nally places the tragedy in the context of colonization – ‘occupation, confiscation and displacement’ – a factor that had been denied by an early generation of Irish Famine historians – and within a comparative context. I particularly like the positioning of what Nally calls the ‘colonial experience’ as central to the responses to the Irish poor prior to and during the Famine. Perhaps, however, there could have been more discussion on the paradox of Ireland's place within the

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British Empire. Many early nationalists were, after all, supporters of the Empire (one book by Richard Davis, 1998, on William Smith O'Brien is entitled *Revolutionary Imperialist*).

Nally's comparative approach works well in showing that for centuries governments and rulers had been acting to prevent famines through food importation, the imposition of maximum prices and punishing those traders who sought to benefit from the shortages. What these actions had in common was the desire to supply food to the people, which was in stark contrast to some of the policies introduced in Ireland after 1845. In terms of the comparative dimension, I wonder if more attention could have been paid to what was happening in Scotland during the Highlands Famine of c. 1846–1848?

The response of the British government has been a central focus of much research on the Famine. Nally shows how prior to 1845 a major concern of British politicians was to make Ireland more governable and, more generally, to centralize state