FROM FAIRIES TO FAMINE: HOW CULTURAL IDENTITY IS CONSTRUCTED THROUGH IRISH AND IRISH AMERICAN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

KAREN HILL McNAMARA

Wee, magical fairies and cheeky, green leprechauns searching for enormous pots of gold jumped off the pages of my childhood books and into my consciousness of what defines "Irishness." The stereotypical stories routinely reflected light-hearted, slightly daft Irish characters who were carefree and often getting into mischief. Contemporary Irish and Irish American narratives have moved beyond my childhood "shamrockery" reading to richer and more developed texts. This essay considers how cultural identity is conveyed in these works.

Children are extremely impressionable, and what they read impacts the way they view the world. Children's literature is a powerful vehicle for delivering cultural awareness and national identity. The plots and themes act as a "cultural barometer," measuring trends in society. Children's literature provides a sense of nationality and helps define the character of the people it portrays. Much has been researched on the role of narrative in the development of a reader's historical understanding, and authorities are clear about its value in children's social and intellectual development.

A short history of Irish children's literature

Irish themes have been featured in scores of juvenile works both inside and outside of Ireland. Indeed, it is quite possible that more "Irish" children's stories have been written by American than Irish authors. One reason may be demographics, as the ancestral homeland of nearly one-fifth of all Americans is Ireland, and according to 1990 census figures, there are eight times as many people of Irish ancestry living in America as there are residents in Ireland today. Another consideration is market size, as the United States publishes over 5000 children's stories annually, compared with fewer than 200 in Ireland.

Curiously, despite Ireland's prolific and long literary history, children's literature in Ireland is a relatively recent phenomenon. Prior to the 1980s, "with a population small in number and with a weak economy, there was simply no market for children's books in Ireland," observed children's literature scholar Emer Sullivan (6). Irish author Tony Hickey provided a personal example of how limited the production of children's stories in Ireland was during this time. During our interview

in Dublin, Hickey lamented: "When my book, *Matchless Mice,* came out in 1980, I was amazed to discover that it was the only children's book published in the Republic that year!" The majority of Irish children's writers had regularly turned to the United States or England to be published, and these books had to fulfill "foreign expectations" with regard to plot, theme, and characterization. "Overseas publishers tend to want only their notions of Irishness, the land of the leprechauns" (Sullivan 6). Hence, Irish children's stories were trapped in old-fashioned stereotypes, which some bemoan as "stage Irish."

Today, there is what many call a "flowering" of Irish children's literature. Irish children's author Siobhan Parkinson explained this new phenomenon in *Horn Book Magazine:*

> The success in recent years of Irish children's publishing is due partly to the efforts of the publishers and writers themselves, partly to the Arts Council and other government sup port (royalties for creative artists are tax-tree), and largely to the growth in both the Irish economy and the Irish sense of self-esteem, particularly in cultural issues. (I75)

One of the most popular literary genres published for children in Ireland is historical fiction. Celia Keenan analyzed this recent trend in her article, "Reflecting a New Confidence: Irish Historical Fiction for Children. "

> The historical novel has a particular importance in colonial and post-colonial cultures when people need to explain who they are and why their plight is so painful. But the enormous growth of historical fiction for children in Ireland would seem to me to reflect a new confidence in Irish society, emanating from widespread popular belief that if we understand the past we might behave better in the future. (369)

Fictional novels set in the past tend to focus on the human side of history and give young readers a sense of how life was lived. A watershed in modem Irish history is the Great Irish Famine of the mid-nineteenth century. Literature for children presenting this calamitous time illustrates how stories impact the way children view their cultural identity and heritage.

Is the Great Irish Famine a significant event?

In 1845, there were more than eight million people in Ireland, the vast majority of native Irish subsisting almost entirely on potatoes. This

dependence on the potato had devastating consequences when a catastrophic blight destroyed much of the potato harvests of 1845, 1846, 1848 and 1849. Over this period, an estimated one to one and a half million people died of starvation and disease, and another two million were forced to emigrate to new worlds, mainly to the United States, Britain, Canada and Australia.

Irish Famine historian and scholar Christine Kinealy described the Great Famine as "one of the most lethal famines in modem history, accounting for a loss of 25 percent of the population in Ireland over a period of six years" (2). In fact, one hundred and fifty-eight years have passed since the start of the Great Famine, and yet Ireland's population has never recovered. Ireland remains the only country in Europe today with a population smaller than it was in 1845.

While historians, economists, sociologists, educators, journalists and politicians have debated the varied and controversial causes for the Irish Famine, all agree that it is a defining event in Irish history. The consequences of the Great Famine changed more than the course of Irish history; the resulting Irish diaspora affected the shape of world history, especially that of America. There are nearly one hundred million people around the globe who claim some Irish ancestry and over fifty-two million of these are Americans, many of who are in the United States today as a result of the Famine ("Irish Identity"). The impact of the Great Famine is critical to understanding modem Irish and American history.

History and Literature

Despite the significance of the Great Famine, it has inspired relatively little fictional writing, especially in the domain of juvenile literature. The absence of children's novels in Ireland that sought to educate young people about the Great Famine and its ramifications is ironic, for Ireland is a nation passionate about history with a world-renowned literary reputation. Recently, many scholars have been addressing this "silence" that seems to have surrounded the Famine. The pathos of suffering and the psychological legacy of diaspora associated with the catastrophe appear to have had long-term consequences on the psyches of Irish and Irish emigrants. The children's novelists I interviewed spoke vehemently about the silence and the Famine's effect on Irish culture. Shame and survival guilt are at the core of this issue. Feelings of deep shame that are associated with being perceived as passive victims, or feelings of guilt that are associated with being perceived as ruthless survivors, have contributed to the sounds of silence. I believe

that this mentality influenced children's authors and publishers, resulting in a paucity of books available on the topic for children.

Since the commemoration of the 150th anniversary of the Irish Famine in the mid-1990s, the topic has received a dramatic increase in media, literary, and scholarly attention. School systems, reacting to this new public awareness, have started addressing the Great Famine, and today it is taught in every school district in Ireland and is included in many American school curriculums as well. This change has also been reflected in children's literature, as authors from around the world have finally begun producing quality children's literature that depicts this historic and traumatic event. Children's writers have imaginatively represented the Irish Famine, bringing the event to life in a way that traditional textbooks cannot. Young people, rarely represented in history books, are the main protagonists in juvenile fiction. Famine novels help young readers understand the greatest crisis in Irish history by personifying it through fictional characters that they can connect and identify with, thus making the history of the Famine feel real to them.

Christine Kinealy acknowledged that "the impetus to remember the Famine was often strongest outside of Ireland," and the chronology of the publication dates of children's Famine books is a perfect exam ple of this (2). The very first children's Famine story, *The Search of Mary Katherine Mulloy,* was written by an American author in 1974. It is interesting to note that the first eight books were all published in the United States. The next nationality to explore the subject was, remarkably, the British, with Michael Morpurgo's *Twist of Gold* (1983). The Irish themselves did not address the Great Famine in children's literature until 1990, 140 years after the catastrophe, when Marita Conlon-McKenna wrote *Under the Hawthorn Tree.* The book surprised Irish publishers by becoming the most commercially successful Irish novel for children, winning countless international awards and resulting in two sequels. Today, it is on the national curriculum and read by every Irish primary student. This groundbreaking narrative marked the beginning of the Irish exploring the subject for its young people.

Historical novels portraying the Great Famine to children and adolescents tend to follow predictable plot patterns. Generally, there is a reliance on two traditional conventions. The first is the quest, which is to survive the Famine, and the second is the initiation into adulthood, demonstrated by emigrating from Ireland. While some novels present the Famine from a slightly non-traditional angle and may insert unique twists and turns into the narrative, overall there is a remarkable consistency in the way the catastrophe is portrayed.

Basic plot formula

"As they drew near the lane they noticed a strange smell, a smell of something rank and putrid" (Lally 12). The typical story opens up with the stench of the rotting potatoes in the field of a small farm, the desperate attempts to salvage any unspoiled potatoes, and the ultimate resignation that blight has occurred. The reader vicariously witnesses the vast hunger the young girl and her family experience as they seek to survive. Most tales contain the historically accurate portrayal of the cruelty meted out to the peasants by the merciless and predatory landlords. Eviction scenes show the suffering and deprivation of thousands who were callously evicted from their homes by English soldiers. Inevitability, each story includes the tumbling of a poor widow's cottage.

With their homes demolished, leaving the main character and her family destitute, the quest for food and work begins. There are depictions of wretched laborers working for a pittance and the contemptuous export of corn and cattle from Ireland while the poor starve. Workhouses feature in these accounts, usually as places to be dreaded and feared. But sometimes the family is reduced to entering them, resulting in disease and disastrous consequences.

Death is omnipresent. These are not cheery tales, as they deal with cruelty and hardship, and are heart wrenching at times. The young hero often loses her parents and a baby sister to Famine fever. Yet, despite how desperate the situation may appear during the plot, the key to survival is usually found in the predictable escape from Ireland. There is the journey to the docks, usually on foot, where the protagonist has a series of encounters with the starving along the road. The initiation into adulthood is now unfolding. Eventually the young woman reaches the docks and makes the horrendous passage to North America in a "coffin ship." Graphic descriptions of the crowded, stench-filled pit of steerage where she comes face to face with illness and death are common. In fact, the plots are somewhat repetitive with the central character always befriending another family, an older passenger always dying of fever and being cast overboard, and the typical storm at sea. Sometimes the story concludes with the arrival into America and the passage into adulthood is completed. These narratives offer the Irish immigrant a fresh start, and the story is able to conclude on a happy or at least hopeful note. Sequels, all set in America, follow five of these novels.

When emigration happens early in the story line, the plot formula continues to be predictable. The protagonist typically battles discrimination, struggles with prejudice, and encounters signs that say, "No Irish Need Apply." Eventually these tenacious young women find work as domestic servants in New York or are employed by the textile mills

in Massachusetts. Generally these books also end happily. Often the central character raises the passage money for the rest of her family to come over and has fallen in love in her new homeland.

Emigration, commonly employed by novelists because the Famine resulted in massive migration, also provides these despairing tales with an optimistic and promising ending. Of course, not all of the Famine novels end happily. The children never locate their missing parents in *Under the Hawthorn Tree* (1990), Mary dies of cholera in the epilogue in So *Far from Home* (1997), and in *Across the Sea from Galway* (1975), the ship crashes along the coast and nearly everyone onboard perishes. Yet, most children's books prescribe a happy ending, or at least conclude with a message of hope.

Heroic Characters

These are survival stories. The resourcefulness and inner courage necessitated in escaping starvation and fever under horrendous circumstances lie at the center of these novels. While the body of adult Famine literature is often told as one of passive victimization or as one of resistance, children's Famine literature centers on the will to survive incredible hardships. The main characters are consistently courageous, spirited, quick-witted, and independent. Determined to create new and better worlds for themselves, these young heroes learn to endure and to seize every chance for survival. It is my argument that the traits and qualities of these protagonists represent "Irishness" to readers.

Take, for example, American Susan Campbell Bartoletti's *Black Potatoes,* which was awarded the coveted Robert F. Sibert Award for the most distinguished informational book for children published in 2001. This 160-page text examines the events of the Famine and the experiences of ordinary people living in that time. I met and interviewed Bartoletti, and she told me how she intentionally avoided highlighting the victimization and instead focused on heroism. She went on to say, "What are the heroic acts? If we look at searching in fields for turnip tops and edible weeds, that is a heroic act. Yes, you are a victim, but you are also a hero because you are struggling to survive and help your family survive."

This attitude is a familiar one, and several of the authors I interviewed have noted the desire to present heroism. When I spoke with Marita Conlon-McKenna in Dublin, she expressed a view similar to Bartoletti's, noting that the central theme in *Under the Hawthorn Tree* (1990) is that these children have made up their minds to survive. "They're not going to be beaten; they're not going to lie down and die," McKenna told me. A passage from the novel illustrates this theme:

> Michael and Eily decided that they must get Peggy and themselves strong enough again for the rest of the journey. It was their only chance.
>
> The next few days were spent hunting for food. They had to keep the fire going also. They had finished the blood. Michael went searching at night and had been lucky enough to catch a rat and a hedgehog. They had lost their squeamishness by now and knew that all that mattered was their survival. Nettles were plentiful, and every ripened berry was also picked. (133)

Novels about the Great Famine allow readers to vicariously experience the devastating effects that famine, poverty, and homelessness can have on people, and provide an understanding of human resilience. Children, who are beginning to form their own values and principles, can learn from the bravery and hope of the protagonists who persevered against the odds. I believe these stories allow young readers today to relate to these Irish protagonists as heroes, thus counteracting potential guilt and shame that may have plagued the generations before them.

Why didn't the Irish just fish?

Consider this personal memory relating to this guilt and shame theme that I am trying to convey. I have vague recollections of my social studies teacher remarking how it was ludicrous the Irish never fished the seas, implying that they were responsible for starving. This sentiment is not unique, and some of my American contemporaries had similar recollections that the Irish were too lazy, too stupid to save themselves. "It is difficult at first to understand why the Irish people, thousands of whom lived near the coast, did not fish," Cecil Woodham Smith acknowledged in the groundbreaking text, *The Great Hunger: Ireland 1845-1849* (1962), the first mainstream factual account on the Irish Famine (298). Certainly it is unflattering for a nation to perceive itself as passive victims.

Contemporary Irish children's literature has changed this misconception. Imbedded in numerous narratives are the various reasons explaining why Ireland, an island surrounded by water, failed to take advantage of its maritime wealth. Novels such as *Under the Hawthorn Tree* (1990) and *Twist of Gold* (1983) educate children by portraying their characters taking risks by fishing illegally. American author, Eileen Carbonneau, informs her readers about the laws in Ireland during the 1840s in her young adult romance novel, *Rachel LeMoyne* (1998).

Rachel observes the manor home as a "place of crystal chandeliers, oil paintings, majestic trees, and a trout-filled river in which the poor might be killed for fishing" (65). The disparity between the English landlords and the Irish peasants are clearly shown. *The Hungry Wind* (1997), by Irish author Soinbhe Lally, also reveals the hardships endured during the Great Famine:

> Each day the women and girls went to the rocks to gather seaweed and shellfish. At one end of the strand there were stretches of muddy sand, encrusted with acres of mussels, but they were not allowed to pick those. For fear that hunger would tempt them the landlords agent, Mister Hamilton, sent his men to warn tenants, that the mussel beds were not included in their shore rights. (14)

Consider the most popular children's Irish Famine novel in North America, *Nory Ryan's Song* (2000). Written by American Patricia Reilly Giff, a descendant of Famine immigrants, this ALA Notable Book has been widely distributed in the United States and has sold numerous copies. Giff, winner of two Newbery Honor Awards, has recently written a sequel, *Maggie's Door* (2003). In Giff's first Famine story, twelve-year-old Nory and her family live along the west coast of Ireland, and her neighbors fish for a living. Disaster hits when their landlord, Lord Cunningham, confiscates their currach:

> The currach was gone too, gone to pay for the Mallons' rent from last year. Gone, not even for Cunningham to use. "What would he want with the sea, and the cold, and the aching hard work?" Liam had said. "What would he want with the danger?" Devlin (the landlord's agent) had locked it up with chains on the pier in the harbor. It would be there, with the tar on the canvas drying and cracking, until great holes appeared and the currach wasted away. It wouldn't be the first time. There were others there, waiting for the owners to pay the rent they owed and get them back, but that never happened. (69)

A passage from the fantasy novel, *Knockabeg: A Famine Tale* (2001), written by Irish American Mary E. Lyons, echoes this theme as well. "The shillings go to Lord Armitage Shank for his bloody rent! Many families have even sold their hide canoes and fishing nets to pay the fee" (5).

These examples certainly do not correlate laziness with Irishness. Instead, the books educate young readers by illustrating the varied and complex circumstances surrounding the fishing problem, such as fishermen being forced to sell their gear to buy food for their families and fishing rights belonging to the English landlords. Shame, that may have been associated with passive victimization, has now been replaced by an accurate historical understanding of this issue. Children's literature of the Irish Famine, non-existent during my childhood, sheds a new light on complicated issues and educates children by weaving historical information throughout the narrative.

"He took the soup"

Many may recall the phrase, "he took the soup," or the insulting term, "souper." These expressions are still heard today and were coined during the Irish Famine when anti-Catholic zealots would provide free soup to the destitute villagers if they first agreed to renounce their religion. So strong was the Catholic faith in Ireland during this time that some Irish starved to death rather than convert to Protestantism. Those that did turn apostate and partake in the soup were called soupers, a disdainful stigma that often marked their families for generations. "Souperism," the nickname for this proselytization aspect of evangelical Protestant missions, it is more frequent in Famine folklore than in historical research. While souperism did occur, it was uncommon. However, it created tremendous tension where it did exist, resulting in long lasting and bitter memories that have been passed down from generation to generation.

Though not a universal motif in the children's Irish Famine narratives, souperism is mentioned in several works. Interestingly, the reaction by the main characters is usually one of ambivalence, and vague attention is given to the religious pressure. For example, in *Under the Hawthorn Tree* (1990), Eily, Michael, and Peggy sleep outside a soup kitchen in order to be the first in line the next day. "During the night an old man shook them and told them to be on their way, as the heathens would try to convert them in the morning and if they took another mug of soup they may as well take the Queen's shilling. The children were puzzled, but simply ignored him" (81-82). The children were offered stew the following day and were not asked to renounce their faith. Certainly no guilt or shame is associated with the old man's remark, and the story moves forward without additional comment.

Souperism is also mentioned in passing in Canadian James Heneghan's *The Grave* (2000), a time-slip novel for young adolescents.

The teenage protagonist, Tom Mullen, is also confused when he is labeled as a souper.

> We joined a lineup for soup and had to take it inside and listen to a sermon from a bad-tempered minister named Nangle who went on and on about popery and sin and other stuff I didn't understand. As we came out, a bunch of old biddies were standing in the street yelling at us, calling us Soupers. I was too tired to ask Hannah what the fuss was about. (103)

Tom appears too famished and fatigued to be concerned about derogatory comments from onlookers, and no conversion of faith in exchange for food occurs in the novel.

In *Mary-Anne's Famine* (1994), written by Irish author Colette McCormack, the soup kitchens are accepted, and the local priest even encourages his parishioners to partake in the charity. Mary-Anne records in her journal:

> The soup kitchens are near us and we must make use of them. Father O'Rourke tells us never to mind that the people who give out the soup are not of our religion, to live is the important thing. Some people turn from being Catholics so they will get more soup and other help. We drink the soup but it is not very good. (16-17)

In *Red Bird of Ireland* (1983), by American Sondra Gordon Langford, Aderyn hears about the evangelical Protestants second hand, and the story line is sympathetic to the Famine victims who succumb to souperism:

> "We saw something else by the wharf, Father Domhnaill," said Seamas. "There was a little house from which some well-dressed people were offering soup to the poor who stood around. There were many poor and hungry, but on one would eat. A man told me that, in order to get that soup, you have to blaspheme the Blessed Virgin and the Holy Catholic Church. Can that be true?"
>
> "I'm afraid so," said Uncle Domhnaill. "I've been told, by priest and others, that there is food being given out, all over Ireland, to those who will abjure their Catholic faith. Some poor souls are so hungry that they do turn from their faith in order to get some food. Those who do so are well

> cared for, afterward. I don't judge a starving person who does what he feels he must in order to stay alive, or keep his family alive. I pray for him. God in heaven will be his judge, not I." (147-148)

Collectively, there is a lack of any serious religious tension in children's literature of the Famine, and it is interesting to note that souperism is not referenced again during the narratives. These passages show compassion to the starving people who took the soup. The characters are not ostracized or made to feel blameworthy in any way. Although the practice of souperism was not widespread, where it did occur it still remains an emotive part of the oral culture of the Famine, and guilt and anger are still in the mindset of some Irish and Irish Americans today. Children's literature, however, appears to playa pivotal role in dissipating this souperism friction. Perhaps a more confident Irish identity results from this new understanding and awareness. The protagonists, with whom the young readers identify, are heroes, surviving by any means they can, whether it is accepting soup from people of a different religion, fishing illegally on the landlord's land, or emigrating from their homeland.

Conclusions

Historical fiction presenting the Great Famine provides a nexus between the past and the present, educating children about this consequential historical event, while revealing the unspoken significance the Irish Famine has in their current lives. It is important for children to remember that the horrific extremes of famine and poverty during the 1840s are still prevalent in many parts of the world, and refugees come to Ireland and America to escape these conditions. It is vital that Irish and Irish Americans make the connection that their ancestors shared the plight of these people today. Quality historical fiction can provide young readers with a sense of continuity in time and history and an awareness of their roots that encourage appreciation for where they came from and where they are going.

As a young American child in the 1960s, my exposure to literary Irish characters was limited to the stupid housewife, Mrs. Callahan, in Richard and Phyllis Atwater's classic book, *Mr. Popper's Penguins,* or the portly policeman, Michael, and his boss, Clancy, in *Make Way for Ducklings,* Robert McCloskey's Caldecott Award winning book (Savage 37). My understanding of Irishness was limited to Lucky Charms cereal, "Kiss me I'm Irish" buttons, and wearing green on St. Patrick's Day. These outdated clichés are being replaced with modem and more

accurate definitions of Irish culture through children's literature of the Great Famine. Carefree peasants catching leprechauns are now superseded by courageous children combating illness, starvation, eviction and emigration.

Consider twelve year old Eily, the eldest of the O'Driscoll children in *Under the Hawthorn Tree*. This character grows in strength and courage as she assumes the responsibility for her younger siblings after her mother has left. Eily's bold determination and resourcefulness are clearly shown as she struggles to find food to live another day and keep her siblings alive. She demonstrates maturity and ingenuity as she nurses her sister, Peggy, who is stricken with famine fever, and her brother, Michael, who is suffering from an infectious wound. In the middle of the novel when hunger and homelessness becomes overwhelming, Peggy muses "Are we in hell?" and Eily responds, "No, just a place destroyed. Come on, we'll move through this as quick as we can" (108). Eily's indomitable spirit transcends this time of misery as she endeavors to survive.

"I wanted to make sure the children were intelligent and resourceful," Conlon-McKenna explained during our interview. Creating characters that were models for her own children, Conlon-McKenna made the O'Driscolls different from her own childhood reading. She lamented that very few books in the past portrayed Irish children as clever or thinking for themselves. "They were nice kids. Kind, but dull. Not smart. No bright sparks." As a child, Conlon-McKenna emulated Laura Ingalls and Heidi instead of identifying with Irish characters. "It's a strange thing, really, but when I read other children's books from other countries I would say, 'I wish I could be her.'"

Conlon-McKenna's sentiments were echoed by other authors I interviewed. Many writers for children purposely depicted confident and positive Irish characters in their Famine narratives. The protagonists remained strong throughout the story line by enduring emigration from Ireland and battling bigotry and intolerance in America. These attributes are rooted in historical fact as Hasia Diner described in her scholarly text *Erin's Daughters in America* (1983). Her research revealed that thousands of Irish woman were able to utilize ambition, energy, and ability that would otherwise have remained stifled by the effects of the Great Famine. Diner describes these educational and occupational successes and emphasizes that the qualities that enabled many Irish to prosper can be found in Ireland's cultural traditions.

The personality traits that Diner articulates are repeated in the central characters of children's fiction of the Famine. Themes of resiliency, gallantry, love, and loyalty, commonly portrayed in Famine novels, are interpreted by youngsters as typically Irish. Young readers, who often

identify with the child characters in the story line, relate to the perseverance of these protagonists and believe that they also can successfully learn to handle difficult situations. Reading about the Great Famine in fictional novels gives Irish and Irish American children a new cultural identity and a deeper meaning regarding their ancestral homeland.

In Ireland, as in all countries, literature is the mirror in which the events of a nation's history are reflected. Whether examining historical fiction, or the many other literary genres, a study of children's literature may be regarded as a study of a country and its people. Authors of Irish children's stories play an important role in the developing and nurturing of a distinctive Irish identity. The absorption of cultural knowledge from early childhood through young adult reading is particularly acute. The characters in Irish children's stories have developed from the weak and stereotypical images represented in my childhood reading, to the fresh, appealing, and strong-willed heroes portrayed in contemporary Irish stories that my children are reading today. The story lines have matured from traditional folktales to modem and expressive narratives. This encouraging and accelerating change over the last few decades is an indication of how Irish and Irish American society and cultural identity has also evolved.

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