

Books

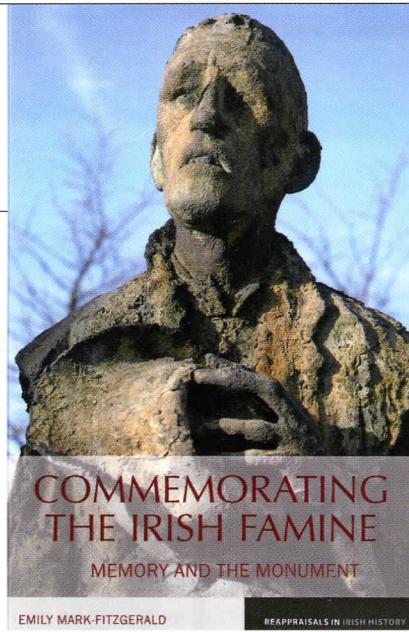
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This is an academic collection. Its contributors are accustomed to specific interpretations of phrases such as 'geographical imagination', 'positivist representation', even 'Irish studies' and 'visual culture studies', many of which it was felt unnecessary to define. With an introduction and twelve essays, it is an accumulation of many voices, many disciplines, and many points of view. Some of the contributions are more readable than others; there are occasional outbreaks of that wilful opacity characteristic of a certain style of academic writing, one which can produce statements so impenetrable as to be ultimately devoid of meaning. What are the un-initiated to make of: 'Through the visual stimulus below the conscious threshold of retinal perception, the image of the past is secreted away in the material conditions of the city's shaping of optical perceptions of itself'. There are also unhelpful typos, oddities of phrasing and simple mistakes – the Parliament of the United Kingdom is not 'in Whitehall' nor did the College of Science in Upper Merrion Street become the 'seat of the Irish Free State parliament' in 1922.

The majority of the essays are worth reading and many are rewarding, revelatory and engaging: Gary Boyd, for instance, on ephemeral architectural projects – pleasure gardens, temporary monuments, unrealized city plans – each a momentary vision 'unburdened by reality: a barometer of idealism'; Sean Mannion on that herald of Modernity, the electric light, and the stark coexistence in Dublin of progress with 'human suffering and infrastructural regression'; Denis Condon on the blossoming of cinema in the second decade of the last century and its impact on the 'geography of entertainment' in the city.

Linked by their considerations of the visual, be it architecture, photography, cinema (both the buildings and the projected image) or graffiti, at the heart of each contribution is Dublin, grand, greasy, progressive, regressive, religious, secular, historic, contemporary. Whatever about 'visual culture studies' or 'Irish Studies', these essays cumulatively form a welcome addition to the corpus of Dublin studies.

Colum O'Riordan is General Manager of the Irish Architectural Archive.



COMMEMORATING THE IRISH FAMINE: MEMORY AND THE MONUMENT

EMILY MARK-FITZGERALD

LIVERPOOL UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2013

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William J Smyth

In this superb book about a complex subject, Emily Mark-Fitzgerald cogently charts the complicated history of how the Famine has been visually represented, especially since the 150th commemorations. The author not only illuminates this specific theme but is revealing about the concerns and anxieties of both modern Irish societies and the many diasporic Irish communities about identities and representation.

The introduction raises a series of key questions as to how and why the Famine has moved from an 'unspeakable event', to

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perhaps the most visualized cultural experience of the Irish across the globe'. In chapter 2, the author skilfully traces the relationship between the visualizations of the Famine in the mid 19th century and their contexts, in terms of their viewers' reception and moral values of the time. Many conventions of Victorian visualizations have proven remarkably durable – showing up time and again in recent commemoration projects. Chapter 3 is an outstanding reconstruction of the many contested debates about revisionism and Famine history, the notions of Famine 'silence' and 'trauma' and their validity and the controversies surrounding the

National Famine Commemoration's strategies in the 1990s. For me, the most enthralling chapter (4), written as are all the chapters with skill and subtlety, deals with the construction of over seventy new Famine monuments in Ireland since 1995. Restored workhouses and famine cemeteries/mass graves in often out of the way locations are the most commonly used commemoration sites. Here local initiatives and the specifics of Famine suffering in the locality are central. Most memorials do not focus on themes of emigration, renewal and triumph as many do overseas, but tell stories of the neglect of the Famine poor, solemnly remembering the dead who were so often buried without customary rituals. Here Famine spaces have been made sacred by the dead. Case studies of Carr's Hill, Cork and Knockfierna in Co Limerick illuminate these themes while critical assessments are made of more elaborate projects. Contests about organization, location and aesthetics are more a feature of monuments erected from Northern Ireland through Britain, Canada and USA. Yet these monuments reveal an ongoing fierce custodianship of Famine memory across communities of the diaspora. The final chapter – on major Famine memorials – makes well-referenced comparisons between monuments in Dublin and Boston, Murrisk and Philadelphia and concludes with a nuanced appreciation of

the outstanding commemorative sites in Sydney and New York.

Emily Mark-Fitzgerald commands a challenging literature with great facility. Primarily an art historian, she is a fine cultural geographer and observant ethnographer. Negotiating a path through issues surrounding the organization, funding and completion of Famine projects worldwide, she gives her own judgements on both the nature of the conflicts and the aesthetic qualities of the monuments. It is a landmark study, which will stand the test of time. ■

William J Smyth is joint editor of *The Atlas of the Great Irish Famine*, CUP 2012.