

John Mitchel's *The Last Conquest of Ireland (Perhaps)* and Liam O'Flaherty's *Famine*: A Question of Tone

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“What tone do you use?” This is a question raised in an essay by the novelist Colm Tóibín in which he ponders the difficulties faced by historians when writing about the Great Irish Famine.¹ In view of that topic's scale and complexity, the question is hardly out of place. Between 1845 and 1852, approximately one million men, women and children died of starvation and disease, while another million and a half fled overseas to Canada, America, Australia and Britain. The underlying cause of this massive depopulation was an unknown disease which destroyed the potato, the food on which nearly four million Irish people depended for their sustenance. In short, it was a natural disaster. But as Judith Shklar has argued, although “the immediate onset of famine is caused by natural misfortune [...] its persistence owes far more to human injustice or folly or both. Because there is a nonhuman element in famines, it is particularly easy to think of them as inevitable.”² But in any assessment of the causes and consequences of famine, the question of human responsibility cannot be evaded. In the case of the Irish Famine, this question has long been a matter of contention.

Up through the early 1950's, historical writing on the Famine was dominated by a nationalist interpretation which held the British government and the landlord class responsible for mass death and large-scale emigration. This view was eventually challenged by so-called revisionist historians who defended the establishment and dismissed the nationalist interpretation as too politically and emotionally charged to warrant credibility. The problem with both of these readings is not so much their interpretations *per se* as the one raised by Tóibín: the problem of tone. Historians of both camps insist that their own view of responsibility is correct, leaving little or no scope for discussion. Such coerciveness, perhaps more forceful in nationalist works, but

¹ Colm Tóibín and Diarmaid Ferriter, *The Irish Famine: A documentary* (London, 2001), p. 9.

² Judith Shklar, *The Faces of Injustice* (New Haven, 1990), pp. 67-68.

unmistakable in much revisionist writing as well, may actually run the risk of alienating readers who might otherwise have tried to keep an open mind.

Without wishing to be coercive myself, I can perhaps assume that most of my own readers would agree with Ciaran Brady that “all attempts at making sense of, or judgements about, the past are inevitably relative and conditional measures that constantly invite qualification and restatement in the dialogue between writer and reader.”³ But in a historical narrative whose dominant tone is assertive, judgements come across as absolute rather than relative and conditional. The writer’s authoritarian voice threatens to silence any objections readers might have even before they are raised. The dialogic spirit so essential to genuine communication is suffocated.⁴

A case in point is John Mitchel’s *The Last Conquest of Ireland (Perhaps)*, in which the author declares that “[t]he Almighty, indeed, sent the potato blight, but the English created the famine.”⁵ Whether accepted, modified or categorically denied, this claim has haunted most Famine narratives, historical as well as fictional, ever since the book was published in 1860. And *Famine*, Liam O’Flaherty’s novel of 1937, is no exception. Given that its central theme is the peasants’ struggle for survival, the question of responsibility is bound to come up, and O’Flaherty does not shy away from it. Yet his approach is quite different from Mitchel’s in conveying a sense of uncertainty, clearly allowing for the possibility that to blame the English alone may be too simplistic.

More closely examined, the contrast between these two books has much to tell us about the Famine itself, both as an historical occurrence and as part of subsequent cultural memory. But what it can also serve to highlight is the importance of tone to communication in general, both literary and non-literary, both fictional and non-fictional.

³ Ciaran Brady, “‘Constructive and Instrumental’: The Dilemma of Ireland’s First ‘New Historians’”, in Ciaran Brady (ed.), *Interpreting Irish History: The Debate on Historical Revisionism* (Dublin, 1994), pp. 3-31, esp. 31.

⁴ I use the term “genuine communication” in the sense explored in a number of recent publications by Roger D. Sell. See, for instance, his “Literary Scholarship as Mediation: An Approach to Cultures Past and Present”, in Balz Engler and Lucia Michalcak (eds), *Cultures in Contact* (Tübingen 2007), pp. 35-58.

⁵ John Mitchel, *The Last Conquest of Ireland (Perhaps)* [1860], ed. and introd. Patrick Maume (Dublin, 2005), p. 219.

Mitchel's analysis of the Famine is based on his conviction that its causes and consequences were directly attributable to British rule in Ireland. The Famine, he claims, provided England with one more opportunity to complete the conquest of Ireland, a conquest which had been attempted at different stages ever since the time of Elizabeth I, through the Cromwellian campaign and the implementation of the Penal Laws, up to the suppression of the 1798 rebellion. The Union of 1801 was, he thinks, a further step toward final conquest, since it deprived Ireland of her legislature and placed her produce and industry totally in England's power. In his view, it was a union in name only, a union which looked exclusively to British interests, as became all too evident when Ireland was hit by the potato blight and the government failed to alleviate the ensuing famine:

That an island which is said to be an integral part of the richest empire on the globe—and the most fertile portion of that empire [...] should in five years lose two and a half millions of its people (more than one fourth) by hunger, and fever the consequence of hunger—while that empire of which it is said to be a part, was all the while advancing in wealth, prosperity, and comfort, at a faster pace than ever before—is a matter that seems to ask elucidation.⁶

Mitchel offers a simple explanation for this apparent anomaly: Ireland was perceived to be overpopulated, and the potato blight brought the prospect of a swift solution to the problem. The blight and the consequent famine “placed in the hands of the British government an engine of State by which they were eventually enabled to clear off [...] two millions and a half of the ‘surplus population’ [...] in a business-like manner” (pp. 82-83). Under the guise of relief, the government devised and administered a series of measures which Mitchel labels “contrivances for slaughter”, because in effect they aggravated rather than alleviated the impact of the potato failure. Any chances the Irish poor might have had of survival were further reduced by the government's refusal to prohibit the export of agricultural produce.

⁶ Mitchel, *Last Conquest*, p. 8. Subsequent references are included parenthetically in the text.

“England was exacting her tribute as usual, famine or no famine”, Mitchel declares bitterly (p. 112). While the Irish people were starving and dying, they were also forced to witness how the food they themselves had produced was “floating off to England on every tide” (p. 212).

Mitchel nurtured a deeply rooted and abiding hatred of British imperialism as it was manifested in Ireland. That hatred, intensified by what he saw as pure malevolence in the government’s handling of the famine, determines both the style and the tone of *The Last Conquest of Ireland*. Rather than arguing his case in the light of documentary evidence, he *states* it with an assertiveness that leaves little or no room for dispassionate evaluation or divergent opinions and conclusions. In the opening pages of the book, he does name a number of “authorities” on which he will draw to substantiate his verdicts. But while some of the statistics and “facts” he presents can be verified, he interprets and subverts others to fit his own premise. When he adds to the list of authorities his “own personal knowledge”—which can hardly be untainted by his hatred—, the result is a fierce polemic that is much more like a political pamphlet than a history. His aim is to describe how, under the yoke of imperialism,

the spirit of the country has been broken and subdued by beggarly famine; —how her national aspirations have been, not choked in her own blood, nobly shed on the field, but strangled by red tape;—how her life and soul have been ameliorated and civilized out of her;—how she died of political economy and was buried under tons of official stationery [...]. (p. 139)

The Famine was “beggarly” because England had plundered Ireland of her rightful assets, and what Mitchel finds especially galling is that the “plunderers” then had the audacity to “send a small pittance of it back to us in the form of alms” (p. 133), while constantly complaining about the drain on the Exchequer which they “chose to assume [...] was *their* Exchequer” (p. 106, Mitchel’s italics). Ameliorating the condition of Ireland meant getting rid of her “surplus population”, and civilizing her people was mainly a matter of curing their perceived barbarity and rebelliousness by force. And at a stroke, starvation, disease and emigration eliminated the “surplus”, and all but wiped out the spirit of resistance as well. This vision of England’s relentless abuse of Ireland

even during a natural catastrophe of devastating proportions is absolutely central to Mitchel's reading of the Famine.

As for the government's relief schemes, represented in the quotation above by red tape, political economy and "tons of official stationery", Mitchel writes:

I approach the details of these "Relief Acts" with great deliberation and caution. They have always appeared to me a machinery for the destruction of an enemy more fatal, by far, than batteries of grape-shot, chain-shot, shells, and rockets: but many persons who pass for intelligent, even in Ireland, do believe that they were in some sort measures of *Relief*, not contrivances for slaughter. In dealing with them, I shall endeavour to exaggerate nothing; as I shall certainly extenuate nothing.

(p. 102, Mitchel's italics)

The claim to deliberation and caution suggests that the writer wishes to reassure his audience that his conclusions are not based on idle speculation or rash judgement. Yet this is actually Mitchel at his most coercive. The manipulative, almost intimidating insinuation that no intelligent person could possibly discern any goodwill behind these measures indicates just how determined he is to drive his allegations home, and it also plays on readers' self-esteem: if we do not accept his point, we are naive or stupid. In accordance with his promise, there is nothing in his account to absolve the government of responsibility. But his own professions of restraint are completely inappropriate. Deliberation and caution are simply incompatible with both his manner and main premise.

In Mitchel's view, the government's strict adherence to political economy was an essential part of a scheme to exterminate the Irish people. As he explains it, the doctrine that "there must be no interference with the natural course of trade" was bound to ensure

the transfer of Irish wheat and beef to England; for that was what they called the natural course of trade. Moreover, this maxim would forbid the government or relief committees to sell provisions in Ireland any lower than the market price; for this is an interference with the enterprise of private speculators [...]. (p. 107)

Mitchel insists that Ireland produced enough food to sustain double her population and that, if exports had been prohibited, there would have been no famine. English ideology and greed deprived the Irish of their own abundant food supplies, an accusation to which he repeatedly

returns. Often he juxtaposes images of departing ships laden with food with images of people starving and dying in a pillaged country, as in his mention of a week in May of 1847 when

poor-houses, hospitals, gaols [...] were overflowing with starving wretches; and fevered patients were occupying the same bed with famished corpses: but on every day of the same week large cargoes of grain and cattle were leaving every port for England. (p. 191)

Such images effectively point to the apparent anomaly of food being exported from a country where thousands are dying from starvation.

To add insult to injury, the government's "alms" in the form of imported Indian corn were totally inadequate to feed the thousands who, in the wake of the blight, were left with nothing but a field or two of rotten potatoes. Although Mitchel grants that "a good many cargoes" were sent to Ireland, he construes the relief effort as a cover-up for the government's real intentions:

their mysterious intimations had led all the world to believe that they would provide large quantities; whereas, in fact, the quantity imported by them was inadequate to supply the loss of the grain *exported* from any one county; and a government ship sailing into any harbour with Indian corn was sure to meet half a dozen sailing out with Irish wheat and cattle. (p. 112, Mitchel's italics)

The importation of what turned out to be insufficient food supplies was not, then, a genuine attempt to alleviate the famine, but an instance of "government spoon-feeding" which was "highly demoralizing", since it tended to make people "rely upon [the government] for everything." This kind of relief, Mitchel claims, was wholly in keeping with England's designs on Ireland. It engendered "a dependent and pauper spirit" which posed no threat to British supremacy (pp. 112-13).

Such designs, though always partly hidden behind an outward show of benevolence, Mitchel found in each successive relief measure. When, in the autumn of 1846, the recently installed Whig government re-opened the public works, the strict adherence to political economy was supplemented by another instrument of government control: bureaucracy. Official directives relating to the employment of the poor were so intricate and mystifying that the result was sheer chaos:

Over the whole island [...] was a scene of confused and wasteful attempts at relief; bewildered barony sessions striving to understand the voluminous directions, schedules, and specifications under which alone they could vote their own money to relieve the poor [...] but generally making mistakes,—for the unassisted human faculties never could comprehend those ten thousand books and fourteen tons of paper; insolent commissioners and inspectors, and clerks snubbing them at every turn, and ordering them to study the documents: efforts on the part of the proprietors to expend some of the rates at least on useful works [...] were always met with flat refusal and a lecture on political economy; [...] plenty of peculation and jobbing all this while. (p. 120)

Mitchel's point here is that this was a *contrived* chaos, brought about by bureaucratic subtleties intended to impede and delay the implementation of the works, thus causing further loss of life. As for the ameliorative effects of the public works themselves, there were none. Unproductive labour paid for by borrowed public money, says Mitchel, could not possibly contribute to the improvement of the country. Small farmers who had no means of paying the additional rates levied to finance the loan were forced to join the hordes of cottiers and landless labourers who were flocking to the works “in the wild, blind hope of public relief” (p. 122). These people were to be paid task-work rates because a fixed day wage was said to encourage idleness. But since many of them were already enfeebled by hunger and disease, they soon found that “they could not earn as much as would keep them alive” (p. 123), and much less pay the rent for their few acres of land. All this led to evictions, to panic emigrations, to more starvation, and to still more death. In short, the public works scheme directly advanced the government's plan to depopulate Ireland. “Many Celts were cleared off that year”, Mitchel writes, “and the campaign was, so far, successful” (p. 121).

Mitchel describes the victims of failed relief efforts in terms which compellingly reveal the devastating impact of the famine on their lives and, above all, the terrible suffering they had to endure. The fact that he was himself a witness to their misery lends authenticity to his account. Travelling from Dublin to Galway in February 1846, he saw along the way

covering wretches, almost naked in the savage weather, prowling in turnip-fields, and endeavouring to grub up roots which had been left [...], groups and families, sitting or wandering on the high road, with failing steps and dim, patient eyes, gazing hopelessly into infinite darkness; before them, around them, above them, nothing but darkness and despair. (p. 147)

The affective language suggests that Mitchel was deeply disturbed by what he had seen, and this impression is strengthened as he describes how hunger was slowly but surely killing children:

Around those farm-houses which were still inhabited were to be seen hardly any stacks of grain; it was all gone [...] and sometimes, I could see, in front of the cottages, little children leaning against a fence when the sun shone out,—for they could not stand,—their limbs fleshless, their bodies half-naked, their faces bloated yet wrinkled, and of a pale, greenish hue,—children who would never, it was too plain, grow up to be men and women. (p. 148)

Here Mitchel employs the conventions of the Gothic to emphasize the horrible appearance of the famine victims. The fleshless limbs, the bloated and wrinkled faces and their greenish hue, conjure up an image of the living dead, and the fact that these living dead are children intensifies the horror.

But the Gothic also provides metaphors by which he reinforces his assertion that all blame for the famine must attach to the government. The same passage continues: “I saw Trevelyan’s claw in the vitals of those children: his red tape would draw them to death: in his Government laboratory he had prepared for them his typhus poison” (p. 148). Charles Trevelyan, who played a significant role in devising and implementing relief measures throughout the famine years, is here made the representative of the government as a whole. Mitchel turns him into the vampire-parasite and mad scientist, in whose disgusting shape all the power of a government bent on exterminating the Irish people is concentrated. In doing so, he shifts the focus from the suffering famine victims to those he perceives as responsible for their misery, and we are again told that they are to be sought, and will be found, in Westminster.

Mitchel’s coercive emphasis, sustained throughout *The Last Conquest*, is likely to provoke one of two responses: acceptance or rejection. A sympathetic reader may overlook the coerciveness, taking it merely as an indication that the writer knows what he is talking about, or may simply surrender to it from the very start. As Thomas Flanagan has observed,

the reader finds himself thinking [...] surely this intricate machinery of inefficient relief, these proliferating committees and commissions which produce nothing save lists of the dead and starving, could not have issued from a whole-hearted desire to

keep the Irish people alive however great the expense to British trade and the British treasury.⁷

Allowing themselves to be drawn into Mitchel's world-view, such readers would be in danger of crediting questionable truths, subsequently, perhaps, as stubbornly as Mitchel himself does. Sceptical readers, on the other hand, may find his tone objectionable enough to discredit his premise without further ado. Even if they granted that his coerciveness may partly be a way of stifling objections to any weaknesses in his case, the outcome could still be the same. Because his inflexibility does not invite dialogue, readers may well feel that any effort they made to understand his point of view would be wasted.

At first glance, *The Last Conquest* may still seem very persuasive. But nowadays the problematic tone will hardly go unnoticed, and closer scrutiny reveals its reliance on distortions and suppressions of subject-matter. Certain facts and figures are manipulated, dodged, or omitted altogether. While exact details are given of the volume and value of exports, the corresponding figures for imports are nowhere to be found. The role of Irishmen in the distribution of relief consignments and tickets for public works is overlooked, so that any abuse involved in these operations can be ascribed solely to British officials. The question of overpopulation is not seriously discussed, and neither is the system of political economy, which is reduced to a mere tool for ruining Ireland. Present-day readers noting such evasions and shortcomings could easily conclude that Mitchel's analysis is too subjective, conjectural and prejudiced to deserve serious attention. On similar (and other) grounds, it has already been censured by revisionist historians, who describe his account of Britain's imperialistic persecution of the Irish as a mere myth.

But although Mitchel's whole analysis and tone raise many questions and objections, it would be a mistake to dismiss him as just a rancorous polemicist. His vivid descriptions and firm opinions became deeply embedded in cultural memory, so feeding in to new historical phases. If we are to understand this, we need to understand Mitchel himself, and others like him, and to recognize that his indictment of the government, no matter how far-fetched, overblown, and misguided it may seem to us today, was not merely the product of hatred, but involved a genuine

⁷ Thomas Flanagan, "Critical Introduction", in John Mitchel, *Jail Journal* ([1854] Shannon, 1982), p. xxxi.

moral feeling which stemmed from a profound sense of injustice. If we acknowledge the legitimacy of his outrage, we may be able to empathize with his point of view, even while still disagreeing with it, and despite all the obstacles raised by his tendentiousness and polemical assertiveness.

But then again, to attempt such an empathetic reading will often be to clutch at straws. *The Last Conquest of Ireland* unquestioningly inscribes the Famine in Ireland's long history of oppression by the British colonizers. Their economic policies led to "starvation amidst plenty", made a mockery of famine relief, and supported a "diabolical scheme" to exterminate the Irish people. In Mitchel's view there could be no doubt that the responsibility for turning the potato failure into a major disaster must be attributed exclusively to the British government. As far as he was concerned, their genocidal intent was perfectly obvious.

Liam O'Flaherty's *Famine* passes no such unequivocal judgement. But at times the author's anti-imperialist attitude and nationalist sympathies do threaten to invade the narrator's commentary. For example, having told how the livestock of the Black Valley tenants is confiscated by the landlord's agent in lieu of unpaid rents, the author intrudes to accuse the government in a manner very reminiscent of Mitchel:

When government is an expression of the people's will, a menace to any section of the community rouses the authorities to protective action. Under a tyranny, the only active forces of government are those of coercion. Unless the interests of the ruling class are threatened, authority remains indifferent. We have seen how the feudal government acted with brutal force when the interests of the landowner were threatened, even to the extent of plundering the poor people's property. Now it remains to be seen what that same government did when those poor lost, by the act of God, all that was left to them by the police and Mr. Chadwick—the potato crop which they had sown.⁸

Here, O'Flaherty obviously finds it difficult to restrain his anger at the injustice his own people were forced to suffer. The references to tyranny and coercion, and to the authorities' brutality, suggest a sympathy for Mitchel's view of government culpability. Yet by focusing on several

⁸ Liam O'Flaherty, *Famine* ([1937] Dublin, 1989), 324. Subsequent references to this edition are included parenthetically in the text.

different characters' opinions as to who or what to blame—if, indeed, there is cause for blame at all—the novel tends to undermine such authorial outbursts. In contrast to Mitchel's book, *Famine* is not entirely dominated by its author's personal opinions. Instead, the question of responsibility is opened up to a discussion in which readers, too, can ultimately join.

The characters who come closest to representing Mitchel's ideas are the curate, Fr. Geelan, and the weaver, Barney Gleeson. In particular, Fr. Geelan strongly condemns British rule in Ireland and is convinced that the government will do nothing to alleviate the effects of the potato failure. He refers to the colonizer as the “tyrant [who] has stripped us of all our power and devoured our substance” (p. 164), and his denunciation of food exports echoes Mitchel very closely:

The people's grain and their pigs and their oats are gone over the sea, to fill broad English bellies [; ...] it's the people's leaders that are out of their minds, for letting the people's food go out of the country [...]. There isn't enough food in England to feed the English, so Ireland is kept as a granary and a butchery next door. (p. 120)

When the parish priest, Fr. Roche, expresses his indignation on learning that Irish proposals for preventing famine, including the prohibition of exports, have been ignored by the government, Fr. Geelan comments that nothing else was to be expected from “a government eager to destroy us as a race” (p. 119).

Here, then, is Mitchel's genocide charge. But Fr. Geelan seems to be the only character seriously to contemplate this notion, at least in a naked form. The subject resurfaces only towards the end of the novel, when Mary Halloran, formerly housekeeper to the land agent, tells another woman about something she saw in Clogher on the previous day:

The working men came marching down the street and they carrying flags with words on them. It was shouting for work they were, the creatures. Then they set on a baker's shop and the peelers began to scatter skin and hair. The soldiers came then and drove into the people. The government is going to kill all the poor of the country. So I was told by them that should know. (p. 438)

The vagueness of the reference to “them that should know” as the source of information regarding the government's intentions suggests that this source is at best unreliable. Judging from the other woman's complete

failure to react to Mary's "revelation", the genocide thesis is not endorsed by the population at large.

As for Barney Gleeson, like Fr. Geelan he blames the colonizer for the miserable state of the Irish people: "the tyrants have taken the rich land from the people and thrown them to live on the western rocks" (p. 49). But he also thinks that some guilt attaches to Irish leaders, and especially to Daniel O'Connell, for paving the way for the tyrants:

I remember when O'Connell and Richard Lalor Shiel started the Catholic Association in 1828, they promised Heaven an' all when Emancipation would be won. We got it and in the following year the landlords, seeing the poor Catholic tenants were voting for them no longer, started the clearances and whole villages were thrown out on the roads. (p. 52)

As Gleeson sees it, O'Connell is just as sure to disappoint expectations now as in the past. So McCarthy Lalor, an MP for O'Connell's Repeal Association, is not to be trusted either. Shortly after the first potato failure in 1845, Lalor appears in the village of Crom to offer reassurance. He calls for a stop to the exportation of food, and demands that the government buy provisions for relief with "our money, of which we are robbed year after year in excess taxation." Insisting that "we are demanding justice, not charity", he intimates that O'Connell will "put forward the plan of the people's representatives for dealing with this catastrophe." The "tumultuous cheering" which follows these remarks signals the faith these people have in their leader—a visually challenged faith, perhaps, which perceives promises where none are actually given: "Those that understood what he had said [...] were explaining to the others that [...] the landlords were going to pay for the destroyed potatoes, that the government was going to supply food and money" (p. 96). Gleeson does not believe this, and has just as little time for the Young Irelanders' talk of armed rebellion "in defence of the country." "Devil damn the bit they'll do only talk"[*sic*], he sneers, "[t]hey will do nothing" (pp. 102-03).

In Mitchel's reading of the Famine, the failure of the relief efforts is ascribed entirely to politics. O'Flaherty's novel, by contrast, emphasizes that the distribution of food and the implementation of the public works was also complicated by social factors. The Crom relief committee, headed by a government representative and the resident magistrate, is composed of the local shopkeeper, Fr. Roche, the Protestant minister Mr.

Coburn, and three illiterate yet fairly prosperous farmers. Fraught by antagonisms and disagreements, this committee proves all but useless. The shopkeeper, Johnny Hynes, strives only to protect his own profits, which are safe so long as food is not sold at cost price from government depots. The three farmers oppose all schemes on the grounds that they are not “within the meaning of the [public works] act”, which they cannot even read. Mr. Swan is concerned only with adhering to government regulations, and the magistrate, Colonel Bodkin, is simply “bored with the whole business” (p. 193). The shopkeeper’s greed for profit, combined with rising prices, eventually makes it impossible for the poor to buy food, especially if they have been refused relief work. The farmers are implicated in taking bribes and favouring their own class when granting tickets for the works. The engineer overseeing relief work has to return “presents of game, even sacks of potatoes [...] sent as bribes” (p. 228), and people are well aware that many “well-to-do” persons are employed because “they have powerful friends” (p. 208). Consequently, the lower classes who are the most susceptible to famine—and who have no representation on the committee which is ostensibly formed to aid them—have to contend with ever diminishing chances of survival.

In addition to social mismanagement, O’Flaherty points to another, cultural factor which seriously hampers the relief committee: religion. Fr. Roche constantly objects to any suggestion made by Mr. Coburn because of “the parson’s proselytising tendencies” (p. 193). The kind-hearted parson, appalled by the terrible suffering of the poor, has to see his good intentions misconstrued by Fr. Roche at every turn. When he sets up a private relief operation for distributing free food and clothes in a cottage opposite the Catholic church, Fr. Roche instantly takes exception to this “devilish plot to ensnare souls by proselytising the hungry” (p. 207). Fearing the wrath of the priest, the villagers do not avail themselves of the parson’s proffered aid. Undaunted, Coburn founds a model farm in the cottage garden, where he grows rye, other cereals, and a new kind of potato, using improved methods of cultivation. Impressed by this “sane conduct”, some people start coming to the parson “for seed and instruction”, but “much to Father Roche’s horror” (p. 208).

Even this effort is doomed, thanks to religious bias and Kitty Hernon. As the destitute mother of five, and with a husband in the madhouse, Kitty seeks employment on the public works, but is refused.

In desperation, she turns to the Coburns and begs them to take in her two youngest children so as to save them from starvation. The parson naturally refuses, but gives her money to take her family to Liverpool. While Kitty goes for the tickets, the Coburns allow her to leave the two babies in the charge of their servant. But then the half-demented mother, obsessed by “the vengeance of God”, ends up publicly accusing the parson of telling her to give up the children. Without questioning this claim, enraged villagers raze “the proselytizer’s” relief centre to the ground and destroy the garden. In this way, a relief effort which could have benefited many is stopped in its tracks. Religion proves stronger than hunger.

Since the plot of O’Flaherty’s novel revolves around the poor peasant families of Black Valley, another factor to emerge as conducive to famine is social injustice. Although Barney Gleeson makes the connection between famine and long-term political oppression, he also holds the social system responsible, because the upper classes can exploit the poor and leave them with no means to improve their situation. He points out that the land does not belong to the farmers, and that any agricultural or domestic improvements they undertake will merely result in higher rents. And when they cannot pay the rent, the landlord takes everything they grow instead—“except the few miserable potatoes they eat to keep them alive”. As he sees it, even in the midst of famine the landlords’ greed for economic gain quite outweighs any concern for their tenants’ well-being:

To hell or Connaught, Cromwell the murderer used to say. Nowadays, begob, the gentry are clearing the people out of Connaught itself, into the grave or the workhouse, or the emigrant ship. (p. 52)

And Gleeson’s concept of “the tyrant” here comprises more than just the colonizing Protestant landlord. There are also tyrants among his own people. Having fled from an earlier “hunger” in his home county, Gleeson is helped to a new life in Black Valley by the Protestant minister, who gives him a plot of land. Before that, however, “many a fine gentleman of my own holy persuasion had turned me from his door with an empty hand and a sick heart” (p. 51). So Protestant landowners who tended to be cruel or indifferent to their social inferiors had their counterparts among those of the Catholic faith.

In the hierarchy of Irish society, landlords are not the only perceived oppressors of the poor. The local shopkeeper, Gleeson claims, can be the worst of all. When Patch Herson remarks that the Protestant minister can afford to be generous since he “steals from the people with his tithes”, Gleeson reminds him that neither generosity nor meanness is determined by religious creed:

It would be as easy for him to be mean like the rest of them as to be generous. Don't they all rob the people? Who is a greater robber than the Catholic gombeen man, as soon as he gets his foot on the neck of his own flesh and blood. We have an example down there in Crom, Johnny Hynes [...]. (pp. 51-52)

Described as “the most powerful man in the parish” next to the landlord, Hynes quickly realizes what an opportunity the potato failure could be to an enterprising man like himself. The government's refusal to interfere with private trade, and their proposals for relief work, can only be “hailed with delight” (p. 178). Wages for the people signify money in his purse. Calling down blessings on the famine and the government, he proceeds to buy up cheap “yellow meal” imported from America, which he then sells at considerable profit, much to the parson's fury. “It's usury, selling this meal at famine price”, he thunders, “[t]hree shillings a stone. Christians getting rich on famine. It's an outrage” (p. 210). Mary Kilmartin, who is struggling to keep alive a family of six, accuses Hynes of robbery, and Mary Halloran, reduced to seeking admittance to an overcrowded workhouse, calls down “the curse of Cromwell” on him. Even his own son calls him a robber and a miser, when he finds out that his father has refused credit to those who have not obtained relief work and are therefore penniless. Hynes defends himself against all these accusations by claiming that he cannot afford to sell for less, and that if he sells on credit he will never be reimbursed. Such claims may be strictly true, but that is hardly the point. The questions O'Flaherty raises here are whether Hynes's conduct is morally defensible, and to what extent it exacerbates the suffering of the poor.

For most of the poor inhabitants of Black Valley, political oppression is an abstraction. As an underlying cause of their increasingly desperate situation, social injustice is altogether more tangible. As Judith Shklar has observed, “[i]nequalities create the field in which the betrayal of

hope and the sense of injustice flourish.”⁹ The O’Hanlon family, living as squatters in Black Valley since their eviction from home and land in Co. Tipperary, exemplify the issue at its most pronounced. Poorest among the poor, they barely survive on what their neighbours can spare them. When Patsy O’Hanlon is laid off the public works, his wife Sally keenly feels the injustice deriving from poverty:

Is it mad the world has got, to let the poor die of hunger while there’s so much riches? [...] How can God above hold back his thunder when such things are happening? Didn’t Christ die for us all? He didn’t die for the rich alone. (p. 340)

As she sees it, the rich never have to suffer the kind of wrongs to which Patsy and his fellow workers have been subjected on the works. The payment of wages has been erratic, and money due to workers dismissed has not been paid at all. “The rich are paid on the nail and it’s jail for those who don’t pay them, but the poor are left to whistle for their mite”, Sally remarks bitterly. Her grievance is deepened by a barely conscious feeling that the more fortunate members of society perceive the poor as a burden. “Ah! The poor”, she muses, “why did God ever pester the world with them?” (p. 340).

Thanks to her determination and resourcefulness, Mary Kilmartin manages to ward off starvation until her family is the only one left in Black Valley. But the pressure of constant struggle and worry, and the horrors of seeing friends and neighbours sicken and die or go insane, almost wear her down. Eventually, she even begins to question her belief that God helps those who help themselves, which has hitherto sustained her in her bitter struggle:

For the first time she rebelled against her belief in Divine Providence. There was no God for her or the other poor people, who were starving to death. God belonged to the rich, among whom there was no hunger and no understanding of hunger. To be affected with hunger was considered, in the world of the rich, a crime which placed the sufferers outside the bounds of humanity. (pp. 420-21)

Like Sally, she perceives the inequalities between rich and poor as unjust, and her resentment of the rich is intensified by the feeling that they are favoured by God, while the poor have been abandoned by both God and their fellow-creatures.

⁹ Shklar, *Faces of Injustice*, pp. 84-85.

For O'Flaherty's peasants, the most debilitating injustice derives from the feudal system under which they are labouring—a system which seems to recognize only the rights of property. This is highlighted when they seek out the landlord's agent, Chadwick, to beg for a postponement of rent payments, only to be refused outright. It comes to the fore again when the relentless agent confiscates their livestock to make up for unpaid rents, thus removing their last means of survival. Although it might be argued that this system is a direct consequence of imperialism, most of the peasants do not perceive it as such. Their resentment focuses on the local "tyrant", not on the absentee landlord in England. Chadwick's demand for rents is the most serious threat to their survival, and the fact that the landlord is the ultimate recipient of their shillings is neither here nor there. As they see it, in their world it is the local "quality" that dictates their living conditions, not the British colonizer. When famine reduces them to destitution, it is Chadwick's indifference, not the government's refusal to interfere with private trade or to continue the public works, which seals their fate.

Ultimately, O'Flaherty does not exculpate the British government. But neither is he able to pronounce them exclusively responsible for the Famine disaster in Mitchel's fashion. Rather, the novel contains a dynamic tension between the author's impulse to blame the British and his actual dramatization of events. Sporadically he does compromise his objectivity, allowing the narratorial voice to give vent to his own opinions, which more often than not incriminate the government. Yet the actions and opinions of his characters clearly indicate that, in addition to the government's handling of the crisis, many other issues are relevant to the question of responsibility. O'Flaherty is apparently well aware that the Famine has been exacerbated by social and cultural factors within Irish society itself, even though, quite contrary to the logic of his tale itself, he would apparently very much like to see the government as the main culprit. This conflict between the tale and the teller could not more clearly reveal his overall hesitation, and by allowing it to come into play, by eschewing the kind of assertiveness which permeates *The Last Conquest of Ireland*, O'Flaherty's ostensible fiction is ultimately more concerned for truth than Mitchel's ostensible history, and invites readers to a more genuine dialogue.