

Eleventh Famine Memorial Anniversary  
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Memorial Address by  
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Irish Author

‘Disembarking Silence’



On a day like this, on a moving but optimistic occasion like this, where history is mingling perfectly with the modern day lives that we live, it is hard to know where to begin. So I'll just jump into the spot about how I come to be here. When I was asked by Tom Power if I would give this address I was not overcome with normal realistic caution but rather an immediate yes sprang to mind and I thought I can worry later about the details. You should hesitate when asked to attend an event 10,000 miles away. But Culture Ireland's offer of assistance helped significantly to make my mind up and for that I'm extremely grateful, indeed I would not be here without it.

I had a lot of time to think when I was a child, to let ruminations and translated dreams take root and become crystal-like butterflies. I was reared in the middle of the countryside, in County Monaghan, one bus a day to the nearest town, a place that wasn't really up to much, or so it might seem now. But at that time, when I managed to get there to Secondary School, I had the first great triumph of the wanderer, I got lost. And discovered that being lost was such fun that I repeated it as often as I could. On one of these journeys around the alleys of Monaghan I found a library, a much bigger one than the travelling van which serviced our lane once a fortnight. And it was here that I first got my hands on a proper book set in Australia. I have no idea what it was, and I do know that it had some elements of what I considered in my twelve year old superiority to be romantic dross, but there was something in it, some colour or yearning, some displacement or peculiar linguistic contortion, that stayed in that silent place where things grow.

Later I took a great fancy to the spot where the Murray and the Darling meet, perhaps because I could always mark it in correctly on the map, which is something that couldn't be said when it came to marking in the Industrial towns of middle England or the spot where the Macgillicuddy's reeks tower over their hinterland. I don't want to get into the details of how all that fermented but the end result was that I got on a ship to Australia at the age of 19, leaving indeed from Southampton. I had accomplished a kind of running away and it felt good. The ship, the *SS Australis*, now fallen into the sea off the Canary Islands, in case

anyone travelled on it and wants to know, landed in Sydney in July 1972, and I, like hundreds of thousands before me, disembarked. It is a strange nation that has that word as a beginning for so many of its citizens.

During the three unbelievable years here, working and wandering and wondering a bit, I first visited Gundagai. And although not given to flights of fancy—I was trying at the time to write rational chilly poetry – I felt something that day as near to the Hungry Grass as I ever had or ever have since. For those of you who have never heard of it the Hungry Grass, an féar gorta as Gaeilge, is a patch of cursed grass. It *may* be a myth, which is the best possibility for a myth, and it can mean what we want it to. Some believe that if a person is overcome with a sense of hunger and collapse at a particular spot then they are standing on hungry grass, which *could* signify where famine bodies lie. Because they do lie somewhere, often where they have fallen, still to this day, far enough from here and indeed Ireland. So Gundagai in 1973 was my hungry grass moment. It's no wonder that years later when I first heard about the Famine Orphan Girls and the fact that drayloads of them had arrived there that I knew I had to follow this story into whatever silence it led me, and back out again I hoped. I was propelled into writing a novel which is now complete and will be published sometime in the future. When I first heard a radio documentary by Siobhan McHugh, and read Trevor McClaughlin's book and then that by Richard Reid and Cheryl Mongan I was on my way, each bit added to the other to complete a rattling away in the cavern, cutting into my life, so that I was forced to complete a memorial obsession, one that had to be satisfied in the same way that even the sound of Hungry Grass makes you want to put on a good feed. I have taken several journeys here in pursuit of more thought on the matter of these girls and, while also enjoying myself, I have learned extraordinary things. When working on fiction some images stay longer than others, holding the diary of Charles Strutt in the library in Melbourne is one, because one has to add to his words to try to imagine the words that his charges might also have written, if they had been on a normal journey and committing relaxed unafraid thoughts to paper. But the one that lodges most firmly in my brain is the spot on the river outside Yass, a bit of water that looks blue from the higher road, where the girls readied themselves for a grand entrance into town. I've been there a few times, looked after always by Cheryl Mongan and her husband, Edgar. Once on my way on a bus I took out the photocopy of the relevant piece of Charles Strutt's diary and discovered that I was coming in on exactly the same date one hundred and fifty six years later, accidentally I promise you—it was another Hungry Grass moment.

Let's be honest, Art is a peculiar business, or as Alan Bennett said, 'Art is hard on the feet. How Bernard Berenson could stand in front of a painting for hours at a stretch beats me. Give me a postcard any day'. And yet we know that whether it be a novel, a painting or sculpture, or a piece of music plaintively or joyously sent on its way to join the birds, the result of artistic drive, whether literally, metaphorically or quizzically put satisfies a craving in us for better understanding. And that includes a better understanding of history. And art works well with history, although it annoys it sometimes in its imaginative cavortings and can be most aggravating when it makes outlandish claims to be telling the truth through fibbing, because that's what art is, truth through lies. Its final purpose is to give us a latitude of view, precisely because it allows us to relate to the past in our private ways.

If I may at this point, I will read you a fictional piece from the forthcoming novel.

*The potato failure of eighteen forty eight following eighteen forty six following eighteen forty five was known to every Irish school child. The effect it had on one depended on what sort of person one was destined to be. Facts, dates, numbers dead, numbers emigrated. There were children who wanted to be boat builders after the first lesson, knew they could make better boats than those coffin ships. There were children who wanted to be*

statisticians, politicians, revisionists, farmers, rebels. There were children who wanted to be singers and song collectors, as if picking the scores of songs and having them all sung back to back on a weekend might undo some of the damage by making it into music.

In other places eighteen forty seven was much as expected. Crops grew quickly, people were fed, commerce continued apace, astronomers found new galaxies, opera was performed. In America a newspaper rolled off a rotary press, but what had that to do with the price of bread. In Edinburgh a new baby boy was born and named Alexander Graham Bell, but what had that to do with the price of bread. A man called Charles Strutt translated a book, but what had that to do with the price of bread and who was he.

After the first lesson there were also children who never wanted to hear another word about history. It brought nothing but grief. Joy, although occasionally pricking up her ears as some new piece of information was added to what she had missed, seemed closer to the group who did not want to know than to the statisticians, naturally, or the politicians. She was a bit in awe of the teacher who was giving the lesson; if he knew all those dreadful things how did he sleep at night. She wouldn't like to know as much as he did. She would have to work hard now at forgetting the bits that had stuck to her memory, the bits that might come out of her head at night, and wind up as fully blown nightmares before she had time to waken up.

*The Potato Famine caused hunger before it caused starvation.*

*Hunger: A desire for, or lack of food. Any strong desire.*

But this hunger was not a desire for, let's say, Pernod with ice, Olives, Lobster Bisque soup for starters, a taste of dry Sancerre, Duck a la Plum for main course, a good strong Burgundy, glazed custard, a plate of three cheeses, port, a brandy, a chocolate liqueur, a coffee. This was a slow gnawing feeling, one that centred first on the stomach, stayed there for days, weeks even, but built into a bigger thing, even when appeased with a little, not enough, food.

Then it radiated to the senses. All one could hear was the clanging of saucepans, the washing of them, the kicking over of buckets in haste to get the cooking started. All one could see was field upon field of profuse food and tables buckling in the middle with the weight of all that was cooked. At night in dreams, there was touching of food on a plate to make sure that it was there, touching the potato so that it mushroomed out into dry, sweet, beautiful froth. All one could smell everywhere, outside and inside, was the overwhelming aroma of food cooking, the aroma of raw food about to be cooked, the aroma of neighbours' food, the aroma of food on the road, the aroma of remembered food eaten. And finally there was taste. A little flick of the taste spots on the tongue, salt, sweet, hot, cold, savoury. A mouthful of taste, a mouth full, and all the taste blossoming into one satisfied swallow, a rainbow in the mouth, disappearing slowly down to the stomach, where the whole dream had started.

When hunger had filled all the senses and dried them brittle, imagination then left, because it could not bear itself, and, anyway, it was now as good as dead without nourishment.

*Nourishment: the giving of food so that hunger does not assault the stomach and the senses, thus killing imagination with a final hammer blow.*

*After hunger comes starvation.*

*Starvation: Being in continuous want, the suffering greatly from hunger.*

*After starvation comes death, which precedes being dead, by a few seconds.*

Hunger and starvation may be a solitary thing, a thing known to one person, a woman up a mountain, perhaps locked away with her mad brother and sister, not surrounded by neighbours who keep an eye and pool sightings. Things like this have happened. Or to a broken young person who meters food into the mouth, so that there will be one thing she

*knows for sure. Or to a man behind bars at war, a man who willingly plunges to the dark hole in the middle of the stomach that radiates and fills the senses, kills the imagination, and makes him dead, seconds after death.*

*But when hunger is happening all over a place, when people look at each other and know that the other person is also hungry, then that is a state of famine. And what we do not want to know is that famine means extreme scarcity of food, but that this may not always be the whole truth, because famine could be extreme scarcity of food getting into mouths, not extreme scarcity of food in fields, in other words food being taken away, stolen, used to pay debt in the middle of the night, used to feed faraway armies, causing extreme scarcity of food going into mouths, leading to a person being able to read his neighbours' eyes.*

*The resulting slow chaos got worse and it seemed as if this hungry time could not be ignored. In London there were many days spent by many people thinking about what to do. This may have included deciding to do nothing, or deciding what not to do, or deciding to put these thoughts to the back of minds, where they could not interfere with London life. It may have included the promise to re-visit the facts a year on, to check the progress of death and hunger, checking too the strain on public funds too. It may have included a continuous desire that when the facts were re-visited all would have sorted itself out. It may have included a lot of worry. Or it may not.*

And these girls arrived. They would presumably, if they could have seen it in its far distant future, have believed.

Kenneth Slessor's poem , *South Country*

After the whey-faced anonymity  
Of river-gums and scribbly-gums and bush,  
After the rubbing and the hit of brush,  
You come to South Country

As if the argument of trees were done,  
The doubts and quarrelling, the plots and pains,  
All ended by these clear and gliding planes  
Like an abrupt solution.

And over the flat earth of empty farms  
The monstrous continent of air floats back  
Coloured with rotting sunlight and the black,  
Bruised flesh of thunderstorms:

Air arched, enormous, pounding the bony ridge,  
Ditches and hutches, with a drench of light,  
So huge, from such infinities of height,  
You walk on the sky's beach

While even the dwindled hills are small and bare,  
As if, rebellious, buried, pitiful,  
Something below pushed up a knob of skull,  
Feeling its way to air.

*On Friday evening, March the first, eighteen hundred and fifty the caravan of horses and girls pulled up three miles outside of Yass beside the blue river. As they had been rounding the hill down into the beginnings of the town Charles had pointed it out to them.*

*'We'll stay there tonight and you will have plenty of water to help with dressing for tomorrow', he said.*

*But when they came to the river it was not quite so blue as it had looked from the distance, with the sky slanted on it. Still, it was water, and easy to approach for washing. Charles let the girls stretch a little, while he checked again his own belongings, wrote up his diary, and put full stops in where he had hurried and been careless before. With the help of the horse drivers he then assembled the boxes. Privacy was garnered in whatever way possible, so that the girls could wash and divvy up their faces for the best possible entrance into the town. Some of them looked beautiful, milling around the river, but they wouldn't have known that. It would have been better to have a room for the washing, and yet maybe this public baptism together was a good way to begin their new lives.*

*'Are you nervous?' a girl asked.*

*This was a more unusual question than you would expect. These girls had an understanding that they must indeed be nervous but that mentioning it might not be such a good idea. The other girl might just be calm that day, and bringing it up would not be appreciated. Or you could hear worse than you feared. But then again the worst had already happened so now was the time to hope, maybe? And it that day was a day of hope you did not want to be reminded that it was not so for everyone else.*

*'I am a bit', Honora said, 'but I would like to be there, not still going to be there'. She repeated, to herself, what she'd just said to see if she understood it and if it made sense.*

*The other girl said that she wasn't nervous now. She was busy mapping out love, already, because after the period of consistent meals an optimism had begun to shine on her with every rising sun.*

*'But I prefer our porridge', another said, as if this might be her last chance to be understood.*

*'You'll get used to the other', they chorused, comfortingly.*

*'I know', she agreed sadly.*

*Honora had an idea what the sound of her voice meant.*

*'I didn't know that I knew anything about our stars until I looked up and couldn't see any of them', she said.*

*'The boxes are ready.'*

*And the girls set to putting the best foot forward. Bonnets and dresses again strode into the streets. People came to take a look. The line of girls moved towards the barracks*

And I want to leave a question mark over them there, I fiercely want to believe that they were alright and who is to say what happiness is.

Dennis O'Driscoll in his poem *Periodical* worries just that question.

When I told you I'd seen  
a Robert Hass poem called 'Happiness'  
you said 'Let's move to wherever  
Robert Hass lives'

Instead I went back for the magazine  
and brought it home to you  
as if I believed in happiness

as something money could buy.

At this point it's interesting to think of these girls and what they might have been. But before that we must acknowledge one thing, if they had stayed in Ireland they might have died. Of course they might not and we could spend months in this spot tossing that back and forth, but this famine, that was being caused by culpable neglect tragically mixed with deliberate self interest, - colonial armies do have to be fed - had no determinable end. So in being removed from everything that they knew, from the very seat of their memories, what could they have become. The answer is 'nothing that wasn't decided for them' unless of course they even fell off that tightrope. And it was always thus for the powerless, particularly those in institutional captivity. We don't have to look too far back to see stark, horrifying and almost unbearable examples of that. There is a wonderful if heartbreaking passage in a book written in the 1950s by the Scottish Jessie Macdonald, who was herself reared in an orphanage because of the conditions of her mother's life. She had been driven to prostitution in order to provide some kind of life for herself and her daughter. Jessie was taken into care, her mother, now suffering from venereal disease and all its ravages came to visit her. On leaving the building, in extreme pain from her condition, she was seen to stagger down the driveway. A hearty defence was put up by her innocent daughter, 'No she is NOT drunk, she has syphilis'. Our laugh and our cry collide in the one sentence. Jessie remained at the orphanage where, despite her obvious intellectual leanings, the trustees decided that it was time for her to go into service. Her plea, 'but I want to be a poet' can be heard from many a corner of the world today. Just so you know Jessie suffered from a nervous breakdown, the diagnosis was neurasthenia, a condition that Elaine Showalter suggests comes from the debilitation of trying to be a woman in a world that was not made for her. In this light I think fondly of all the women who have taken to bed. But also you should know that Jessie, who met and married a cattleman Johnnie Kesson, did get to do her work, writing both novels and plays. And thinking of Johnnie Kesson leads me to the men who met and married these girls, a mixed group we can presume, among them the good the bad and the ugly, and we will hope in retrospect that there was more of the former, taking into account that there have always been good and moral men, looking for a bit of encouragement.

I want to refer to the journey over here and it's an odd use that word, over. Because we don't say down. Well it is down and over We in Ireland still have a shuddering horror when we think of the distance. I'm reminded of coming into Sydney on the plane in 2005 when I met Jeff Kildea as I was peering out the window in my almost laughable hysterical state of cabin fever and he told me calmly that we don't come often to see ye, in a surprising sentence that allied those of us in Ireland who might never even think that there are some of us here. I did this time get on a plane and forget about the stopover, in other words I braced myself and behaved like an Australian, got the journey done, and stopped complaining. Clearly I'm trying to work myself up to an acceptance of the return bit. Chance *is* a fine thing—through that meeting Jeff kindly brought me to meet Tom Keneally, an encounter that I might never have had the privilege of having without the madness of descending from the skies. And this reminds me of your Stephen Sewell and his brilliant play *Myth, Propaganda and Disaster in Nazi Germany and Contemporary America*, nothing like a snappy title to bring the punters in. The play was seen in a Dublin Theatre and afterwards when we spoke he talked of his flight, who wouldn't. He said that for the first two days he was extremely annoyed because having come all that distance everyone looked like himself and he thought he was just at home. He wanted difference for all the effort. He did say that on the third day he suddenly got it, and realized that Ireland did have a different demeanour, a swagger all of its own, in other words its own blás. But our girls did not get here in a day and a night, it took hundred of the same. And it wasn't in their own language either. I'm fascinated by the notion that so many can be

declared illiterate when all that might mean is that they're literate in another tongue, not the one that is being widely used. On Radio na Gaeltachta one day I heard a great compliment about a friend of mine, Tá Béarla iontach aige. He has lovely English, and if we can still hear that to-day can we just try to imagine what it must have been like for some of these young people who had lost not just parents but country and tongues that they understood. It can be too easy to say that some of them had English because the National Schools Act of 1832 had insisted that English be taught. But even if a good number of them would have the rudimentaries, and we can presume that those who had were top of the list for being chosen, but having the words does not mean that it was their first language, the language in which they dreamed. And if accents can make us all warm can you imagine what actual language does. I'm still pleased that it's in Irish I know the minerals of Australia, Ór, Airgead, Copar, Luaidh, Stán, Gual agus Iarann.

And then there was all that water. It was the first mirror of their journey, and remember that reflection in water is not fixed, it swirls as tantalizingly as in a David Hockney swimming pool. And I wonder how many of them had the nerve to stare into it. Certainly they would not have known how to swim but did they even bury themselves momentarily in the changes of the sea or did they instead put its vastness uneasily in the background in case the very metaphor of its endlessness would frighten their imaginations rigid.

Back to this Art business. The one thing about research is that you learn more than you ever intended. In one novel that I undertook I ended up on Death Row in the United States, a thing that I was trying to avoid and yet the further into the story I dug myself the more I knew that it was inevitable that I would have to go there. And that stays with me, the picture of that place, the heat of it and most of all the smells of 40 men, many of them trying to add a bit of Talcum Powder so that they could be marked out from the cage next door. I was well securitised as you can imagine, no note taking or anything as subversive as that, so when I got back out to my rented car - rarely have I enjoyed so much the sound of a slamming door behind me -I tried to get as much down into my notebook as possible. But all I could think of was Edwin Brock's poem, *Song of the Battery Hen*.

You can tell me: if you come by  
The North door, I am in the twelfth pen  
On the left-hand side of the third row  
From the floor; and in that pen  
I am usually the middle one of three.  
But, even without directions, you'd discover me. I have the  
same orange-  
Red comb, yellow beak and auburn  
Feathers, but as the door opens and you hear above the electric  
fan a kind of  
One-word wail, I am the one  
Who sounds loudest in my head.

And it was while I was trying to write a story about Hiroshima that I came across the little known fact that they had put up the best Lily of the Lantern lights in that place, not knowing what would happen them. Ignorance can be a marvellous thing. But the research for this book, apart from the moments of Hungry Grass, had little but joy in it, despite the sadness that began it. And the accumulated bits dropped down into the memory hole, some of them, the ones that stuck like burrs to my mind, re-emerged later, none more so than the prevalence of dance all over the place. I first came to this hearing a lecture at the Aisling Society by Tony Earls, again brought there by Jeff Kildea. There I was listening to an erudite description

of a concert laden with Thomas Moore's melodies and I began to think of how the listeners might have liked to dance, and how much dance there was, how much dance there had to be, about the sailors who had cut out a platform of ice so that they could dance with the sailors of their neighbouring ship. The girls danced too, every night on their way here and we can only hope that it did them good.

We wonder what happened them. We know that they married and had children, and married again and had children and some even married again again and had children and their children's children's children are here to-day, and if we consider the small number of available men who were here at that time these girls are the matrilineal top of a lot of white Australia. We don't have much in the ways of bits and bobs from them, and practically nothing of words—well who did they have to write to. The lack of written accounts could also be because what had happened them was so unthinkable it was best not thought about, best dusted off their hats, shunted down the memory mine, turned on, walked away from, any phrasal verb you like. But what we know for sure is that they disembarked. And that thing that happens, life blooming life, in all its bloodiness and all its splendour, that's what happened them.