

## HISTORICAL VERITIES AND VERIFIABLE HISTORY. LOCALITY-BASED ETHNOGRAPHY AND THE GREAT FAMINE IN SOUTHEASTERN IRELAND

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Far from the bad old days when anthropologists conducted research and wrote ethnographies of particular peoples and/or localities in a more or less timeless mode and *in vacuo*, it has become well-established practice in anthropology today to attempt to take full account of processes through time and to explore the multi-faceted qualities of local relations and meanings as these intersect with wider and/or contiguous levels, agents or forces. Thus, in numerous local places and through variously theorised studies, anthropologists have been trying to see global and regional networks as inter-penetrating with on-going everyday life to produce particular socio-cultural outcomes and, in due course, "particular histories" [Collard 1989]. However, a certain disquiet has recently emerged in response to such ethnographic practice, a disquiet apparent in recent calls for multi-sited field work, transnational viewpoints and/or macro-ethnography [e.g. Marcus 1995; Merry 1992; Wilson 1993]. Although these calls have indeed pointed to some of the shortcomings of locality-based research, they also, in themselves, raise two problems. First, they ignore an important contribution which locality-based research can make to the exploration and re-interpretation of the great events or major transformations which form part of the research canon in such adjacent disciplines as history, political economy and sociology. Second, and no less importantly, such calls invariably focus on the cultural dimensions of everyday life and, in so doing, they segregate out cultural identities, metaphors, stories and lives from their material and social contexts. Why is all this important?

Subject to more or less the same pressures and influences, the decisions, (re)actions and beliefs of people in different localities can nevertheless vary substantially. This is because local, inter-connected experiences comprise the sites in which meanings and interpretations are constructed and decisions made, consciously or unconsciously, concerning practical interests, social relationships, working beliefs and explanatory ideologies. *Inter alia*, this means that with a deeply contextualised knowledge of the interdependence of both beliefs and practices in particular localities, anthropologists have a rich potential both for exploring macro-processes and for reformulating macro-generalisations. It seems to us that anthropologists are still not wholly aware of the potential here. Equally, it seems to us that many scholars who study at the macro-level, namely a large majority of

historians, sociologists and economists, have not yet learned to take advantage of anthropological interpretations. Too often, anthropological studies are ignored because they are seemingly too immersed in the minutiae of local life or, alternatively, their accounts are raided and their "facts" decontextualised in order to provide empirical tit-bits which illustrate the impact of general macro-processes.

In this essay in historical ethnography, we show the contribution which a locality-based anthropology can make to understanding great events and major socio-historical processes. In so doing, we illustrate both the value of contextualisation which invariably accompanies locally-sited research and we show the importance of exploring the mutuality of cultural beliefs and social relations.<sup>1</sup>

#### HISTORICAL VERITIES: THE GREAT FAMINE IN IRELAND

The Great Irish Famine of 1845-9 is unquestionably a "great event". Its material manifestations have formed the basis of innumerable books, articles and speeches whilst its symbolic weight continues to fuel political meanings and actions in Ireland today. However, in the case of the Famine, "the epistemological elusiveness of the past itself ... [is] exacerbated by the nature of the event" [Morash 1995: 3]. It also has been exacerbated by archival deficiencies. Nevertheless, the Famine has commonly-accepted, key features; and these underlie narratives which comprise both national texts and locally-sited social memory.

#### Written History and the National Endeavor

In a text-book used for the final year of primary school until the late 1970s, a chapter entitled "The Great Hunger" taught this story to twelve-year olds in County Kilkenny, southeastern Ireland.

*Poverty in Ireland.* ... There were about 9 million people in Ireland. Eighty per cent ... lived on the land, and almost 3½ million of these lived on holdings of less than 5 acres. These poor farmers depended almost entirely on the potato for their food. They grew a certain amount of corn [cereals], and kept a few cattle and poultry, but this ... had to be sold to pay the rent.

*Famine.* ... In late summer [of 1845], the [potato] crop was affected by ... blight. ... In 1846 [it] was more severe. In some cases, the whole crop was completely destroyed. ... Thousands died of starvation and fever spread quickly, killing thousands more. ... Between 1845 and 1848, over a million Irish people died of hunger and disease, and another million left the country.

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<sup>1</sup> Some of these issues were also addressed by both ourselves and other contributors to a special issue of *Focaal* on history and anthropology [Kalb, Marks and Tak 1996].

**Irish Corn.** All through ... the great Famine, cargoes of corn were sent from Irish ports to England. This corn had been produced by Irish farmers, but was paid in rent to the landlords. ... The government refused to stop the export.

**Feeding the Hungry.** The English government provided some relief work, to give the people an opportunity ... to buy corn. It was the Government's belief, however, that it was the duty of the landlords to ... help ... their tenants. Many of these landlords lived in luxury in England, on rents collected from their Irish estates, and felt no responsibility for their starving tenants. ... By 1847, the people were too weak and ill to work. ... Soup kitchens were set up, and Indian corn [maize] was distributed to the people.

**The Landlords.** Although most landlords did little for their starving tenants, there were a few notable exceptions.

**Aid for the Poor.** The priests and bishops, although poor themselves, helped the starving people whenever they could. The Society of Friends, or Quakers ... established food-centres. ... Food was also sent ... from America and England.

**Emigration.** Many people were forced to emigrate. ... The majority ... set sail for Canada and the United States. Many ... died during the voyages in over-crowded "coffin" ships. ... There was little welcome for these poor, sickly people. ... They were forced to settle in the slum areas of the Eastern cities of the U.S.A. In time, however, as a result of their hard work, they earned the respect of the American people.

**After the Famine.** ... The population ... had dropped to a little over 5 million. ... The emigrants did not forget their native country, and between 1848 and 1864 they sent home £ 13 million to their less fortunate relatives. The money ... and the bigger farms helped the Irish ... to improve their way of life. They were fortunate too, in having leaders who would help them win their rights from the unjust landlords [O'Neill 1972].

In this story are captured the central motifs not simply of the Famine but of much of Irish history as it has been written from a nationalist perspective. Nineteenth-century Ireland was depicted as a country of poor farmers. The causes inhered in a land system composed of dual and opposing interests: rich, absentee landlords as against poor tenants who subsisted on potatoes and who used their grain crops to pay rents. At a time of severe crop failure, it was the Church and outsiders who rescued the survivors while the English government pursued its own ideological agenda. After the Famine, it was emigrants, large farmers, and political leaders who saved the people who remained behind.

A second version of this story can be found in academic texts. Indeed, recent interpretation by both revisionist and post-revisionist historians are direct responses to the nationalist viewpoint which underlay school book narratives.<sup>2</sup> Thus, two questions have formed the foci of these recent approaches. First, was the Famine an inevitable outgrowth of pre-Famine conditions or, conversely, should «prefamine history ... inevitably

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<sup>2</sup> Good examples of the revisionist approach are Edwards and Williams [1957] and Daly [1986]. The works by Mokyr [1983] and O'Gráda [1993] are exemplars of post-revisionist interpretation. For a general review, see Boyce and O'Day [1996].

be interpreted and evaluated in terms of the famine?» [Mokyr 1983: 260]. To explore this, historians have looked at the nature of the pre-Famine economy, of poverty and living standards, and of levels of agricultural development. Second, what of the Famine itself? Who died, how long did it last, and what were the ideologies, government policies and legal entitlements which underlay relief? In other words, in privileging the pre-Famine subsistence economy and the role of British neglect [Vincent 1992: 75], as well as Famine events, the topical agenda of recent academic work has continued the lines of investigation which were delineated by the original nationalist viewpoint.<sup>3</sup>

In all written texts of the Famine, there is the premise, whether articulated or not, that there was one Great Famine and national disaster. Although recent historical work has recognised and made it clear that region and class were important mitigating factors in the severity of famine conditions,<sup>4</sup> the academic research agenda continues to focus on The Famine itself: its origins, trajectory and manifestations. To pursue this agenda, two strategies have been key. First, most of the qualitative and descriptive data have been taken from the west of Ireland. This is not surprising. That is the region where famine was most severe and from which emanated the most vivid accounts. Second, the experiences of small localities have usually been ignored except to illustrate the general issues. Why has this been the case? According to a prominent economic historian, «local, largely non-quantitative studies of the Famine are plentiful but they have been carried out *in vacuo*. Aimed ... at local non-specialist audiences, they lack comparative perspective and analytical sophistication» [O'Gráda 1993: 141].

The disdain of the economist and historian for the local level and the unquantifiable is clear. Yet, the Famine was experienced by people in particular ways because they lived certain kinds of lives in specific places. In such localities, global and regional networks intersected with everyday life to produce particular outcomes. Local places were also the sites in which meanings and interpretations were created. An anthropologist must therefore ask: What Famine narratives were produced in these local places?

### Oral History and Social Memory

Our field and archival research between 1980 and 1991 focused mainly on the small town

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<sup>3</sup> Such intellectual continuity is of course not surprising. It has in any case been noted in other areas of Irish historical endeavor, such as in the analyses of "the long eighteenth century" and the overriding emphases placed on political themes [Owens 1996].

<sup>4</sup> Recent efforts have brought provincial, regional or county discriminations into the equations and/or explored the notion that the Famine was a crisis mainly for the labouring and smallholding classes. See, for example, Cullen [1972: 111], Mokyr [1983] and Donnelly [1989: 35-6]. «The Famine», wrote Cullen, «was less a national disaster than a social and regional one» [1972: 132]. Unfortunately, Cullen's viewpoint has not been followed up by locality-based research.

and parish of Thomastown,<sup>5</sup> although we extended outwards less intensively to adjacent areas of the southern part of County Kilkenny in southeastern Ireland. Because the Famine years, as depicted in written texts, had been so traumatic, we expected that people in Thomastown would have local stories about the Famine which had been handed down through time. As part of our research in historical ethnography,<sup>6</sup> therefore, we routinely asked people what they knew about the Famine in the neighbourhood. In responding, almost everyone, regardless of age, sex, or class, immediately related the standardised, nationalist version which had appeared in their primary-school text books. They also referred to events and conditions in the west of Ireland. «But what happened», we asked, «in and around Thomastown?». Invariably the response was: little or nothing. Nor did people seem to care.

Only two local stories were common. A soup kitchen operated in a particular building in the town, although no one knew how long it was there, who operated it, or who was given food. One teacher related how farmers, including her kin, had brought in food for the kitchen. A second story was that local men were employed by government to build the entirely new "Rock Road" leading south from the town. That road exists today although, outside of the story, it is seldom referred to by that name.

Intrigued by this paucity of tales, we kept asking. We had become close to numerous people in the early 1980s whose memories of the past were clear and vivid and who were generous with their time and knowledge during many hours of conversation. However, they had nothing else to tell us. These included two or three whose grandparents, as we know from the parochial records, had lived in the parish through the Famine. Others with a personal taste for local history recounted talking, when they were younger, to elderly relatives and neighbours, but said that they had been unable to elicit local Famine stories.<sup>7</sup> In some frustration, we spoke with local historians who lived and worked in other locales in southern Kilkenny. They too had been unable to elicit recollections. Contrary to our expectations and to the intensity of the text book imagery, the Famine was not much remembered in local knowledge. Why, in the 1980s, were local memories and knowledge of the Famine so sparse in southern Kilkenny?

An obvious response is that the potato failures and distress were not so severe in this region as to produce stories that were remembered 140 years later. In the sieve of folk

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<sup>5</sup> In 1841, the population of the town was approximately 2,350; another 5,060 people lived in the rural areas of Thomastown Catholic parish. The figures for 1981 were, respectively, 1,300 and 1,360 [Silverman and Gulliver 1986: 22].

<sup>6</sup> This is described in more detail in Silverman and Gulliver [1992a].

<sup>7</sup> After much effort on our part, only two more stories emerged, each recalled by only one or two people. One was that corpses of fever victims had been laid out in a ruined castle in the town. No other details were known. The other, from a person who related the tale somewhat embarrassedly, was that a neighboring farmer had some potatoes in his barn and would look at them and gloat: "Good morning, pence apiece".

memory, Famine stories were not retained because they had no persisting psychological or socio-political significance. Indeed, insofar as memory dramatises and symbolises the poverty and hardships of the past - in conscious contrast with the relative prosperity of the present - it was not necessary for local people to go back 140 years. Poverty continued long after the Famine as did periodic crises of extreme hardship. Thus, in the 1980s, stories of deprivation were embroidered from the early decades of the present century. Such stories also were vivid and concrete, linked as they were to parents, elderly kin and neighbours.

It was this experience which alerted us to the ways in which memories of the past were generally constructed in Thomastown. We found that historical memories were triggered by reference to people rather than to events or conditions. This became obvious, for example, when collecting genealogies. We consistently found that if we named individuals from the parochial records who had been known to a person's parents or grandparents, this triggered memory and stories about them and their lives. In contrast, mention of events, unless informants had witnessed them personally, seldom elicited recollections or stories. However, such "person-based memory" was truncated by time. Two ascending generations was the common limit of memory. For the vast majority of Thomastown people, however, two generations was after the Famine: it was the great-grandparents of older people who had lived through it. As a result, because the Famine was too far back for person-based memory to recall kin or neighbours, there were no people who were recollected who could become pegs upon which Famine stories could be placed.<sup>8</sup>

In a context in which stories were woven through person-based memory, it is not surprising that the standard, nationalist version of "The Famine" was able to take over easily and displace personal stories which might otherwise perhaps have taken root and persisted. Certainly, nationalist versions would have done this, by default, by the third generation. Moreover, in the absence of any mechanism for weaving a collective memory in the locality, or any institution that would appropriate and fix local recollections, it is likely that the dominant nationalist version took over much earlier.

The same appropriation of local knowledge by generalised, nationalist memory occurred in other areas. One example will suffice. We commonly heard allegations about rapacious, absentee landlords who mercilessly and frequently evicted tenants in the second half of the nineteenth century. The documentation did not support this, however; and those few evictions that we did discover were unknown to our informants. Indeed, local people could seldom name actual cases. The alleged evictions invariably occurred a little distance

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<sup>8</sup> Another aspect of person-based memory also limited stories of the Famine. People and families who were seriously and dramatically affected either died (perhaps in a distant workhouse) or, more likely, emigrated. Since entire families left, no descendants remained to remember. As to the lack of memories among the few elderly people whose grandparents had lived through the Famine, we can only surmise that those grandparents had been too young at the time to have had personal stories to pass on.

away - beyond the river, over the hill, in the next parish - and affected unknown tenants about whom nothing was known. Such stories, however, did dramatise and explain the iniquities of the landlord system and of English oppression. Importantly too, the end of that system demonstrated the victory of Irish nationalism. Thus the stories evoked strong emotions concerning past injustices that had been overcome. In contrast, local and particularised memories about Thomastown were irrelevant and unimportant. In fact, some Thomastown people positively eschewed empirical facts that contradicted the ideological orthodoxy.

We suggest that a similar process of appropriating folk knowledge took place in relation to the Famine. Historical events were absorbed, homogenised and simplified as part of a nationalist, political ideology and as part of the cultural expression of Irish identity. In this way, they became part of everyday common sense. Simultaneously, of course, it is important to recognise that in this was encapsulated the ideological triumph of the Irish state. The British colonial state appropriated the means of violence and administration during the nineteenth century and fed a growing nationalism which contested and took over of the apparatus of government in 1922. This nationalist movement, and the state which it won, continued the familiar pattern of displacing local, person-based memories.

### Local Texts and Historical Memory

This displacement of local memory, however, left some slight residue; and this surfaced precisely because we were so focussed on the particular locality. This residue became important because it re-oriented us in our search for The Famine in Thomastown. It also contextualised, finally, those lean vestiges of local, social memory which had remained.

In reading county newspapers for all the news about Thomastown for the period after 1800, we came across a letter to the *Journal* written by a Thomastown labourer in 1937 (6 February). He complained of the «intolerable working conditions» on a public works site in the parish at that time and compared those conditions to what «old people often refer to [as] that unhappy period of our history known as 'the time of public works'». He was, of course, writing at a time - a half century before our researches - when older people's grandparents had lived through the Famine years and would, most probably, have passed on person-based memories which have since been lost.

We also, very late in our research project, decided to explore the Irish Folklore Archives in search of materials on Thomastown. Amongst the materials were the results of a questionnaire sent to school children in 1938 in which they were asked to describe the Famine in their locality.<sup>9</sup> Nothing was extant from Thomastown parish. However, from three

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<sup>9</sup> The records of the Irish Folklore Commission (University College, Dublin) contain the results of a folklore project carried out in the mid-1930s. Questionnaires were distributed to schoolchildren and local intellectuals

primary schools in parishes adjacent to Thomastown came the following comments: the Famine «did not do a lot of damage in this locality and did not cause many deaths». «Food was not very scarce because there were a lot of rich Protestants living around here and they owned large estates ... and because of that large numbers of people were employed». And: «People used yellow stirabout [maize meal] instead of potatoes», that is, they had money to buy alternate foods. All the comments from all the children were similar.

We cannot know, of course, if the articulate labourer's view of the Famine years was common in the 1930s, nor can we know the origins of the children's stories. Nevertheless, it seems clear that the residue of memory contained in the local texts from the 1930s point in a particular direction, and it is a direction which also contextualises the vestigial memories from the 1980s of soup kitchens and road building. This is the importance of the local economy and of governmental action in that terrible time of poverty and distress. It therefore seemed to us that another Famine story had to be written, one which privileged the experience of the particular locality and which made the locality the focus of attention rather than the Famine itself. What this meant, in other words, is that we found it necessary to turn the research focus of historians inside out.

#### VERIFIABLE HISTORY: CONSTRUCTING THE FAMINE IN SOUTHERN COUNTY KILKENNY

By focussing on a locality such as Thomastown, anthropologists can ask different questions, interrogate the sources differently, and explore new or neglected avenues. Because of this, we believe that locality-based ethnography contains the potential for re-orienting the historiographic agenda and for reinterpreting the history of seminal events. At the same time, the data available for a particular locality are necessarily more partial and less extensive than that which can be garnered for a regional or national focus. This invariably moulds the narrative by simultaneously constraining and expanding it. In the case of Thomastown and southern County Kilkenny, the nature and content of the surviving historical records impelled us to explore two key themes: the incursion of the state and the nature of the local economy.<sup>10</sup> As a prelude, though, it is useful to provide a brief

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throughout Ireland, asking about "customs" and "traditions" which people remembered. Unfortunately, the ahistorical nature of the questions and answers (whose customs? from when?) severely limit the utility of the data. However, the odd bit can be useful, particularly when, again, contextualised knowledge of a locality allows one to know who the informants were, their age, kin, class, etc. Volume 849 contains Famine stories from the area adjacent to Thomastown parish.

<sup>10</sup> In any study in historical anthropology, the available archival data constrain the range of issues and topics that can be examined. In the case of Thomastown, there is no discoverable information, for example, on the relations between clergy and parishioners, how far people found strength and consolation in their religion, or whether faith and belief were fortified or weakened.



account of what can be known about the Famine years in Thomastown and its region.

### **The Famine Years (1845-49): The Severity of Potato Failure and Human Distress**

In addressing a key historiographic concern, namely, the severity of the Famine, local studies cannot meet the statistical requirements of economic historians and of national or county-focussed studies. Local data, as is the case for the Thomastown area and southern county Kilkenny, are invariably sketchy and often confused.<sup>11</sup> Largely this is because reports at the time invariably came out of particular contexts. Thus, the county newspapers in 1845 were much inclined to deny that potato failure or hunger was severe. This was in line with general opinion among the gentry who were, at that time, unwilling to acknowledge the severity of conditions and their responsibilities for alleviating them. In contrast, clear exaggerations of the severity of food shortages, unemployment and destitution might be made to strengthen claims for financial or other state assistance. An example of this is a petition sent by "the inhabitants of Thomastown" and its notability to the county grand jury, the body of gentry responsible for allocating monies for public works projects. The petition referred to an «alarming and unprecedented number of the labouring classes now unemployed» and «rendered destitute» because of «the fatal failure of the [1845] potato crop». The petitioners asked that government provide money for the public works required to revive navigation on the river Nore and the town's role as a transshipping centre [Kilkenny Journal,<sup>12</sup> 24 March 1846]. This request was so similar to others made in previous decades that it seems most likely that local conditions in a new context were appropriated and exaggerated in order to buttress an old concern. This means that, in the light of such problems, local-level researchers must look to the gaps in the data and read against the grain in order to assess the severity of the potato failure and distress in particular locales. In so doing, we find a manner of reporting for southern county Kilkenny, in style and content, which suggests that the region was spared the worst ravages of the Famine.

The condition of successive potato crops in southern County Kilkenny can be briefly summarised: 1845, among the worst failures in Ireland; 1846, somewhat better; 1847, some improvement again and enough for food until at least mid-winter; 1848, a deterioration but not a complete failure; 1849, a definite improvement as the worst was over. In such a context, the evidence suggests that farmers managed tolerably, substituting root crops and oats for their diminished potatoes. There were no reports that they did not pay their rents. Even many small-holders coped, though doubtless with greater privation.

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<sup>11</sup> This of course raises an issue which is seldom addressed by historians. If local data are confused, how can national and regional data, which are built up from numerous local experiences, be less confused?

<sup>12</sup> In all later references to the county newspapers, the *Kilkenny Journal* is cited simply as "KJ", the *Kilkenny Moderator* as "KM", and the *Kilkenny Independent* as "KI".

Years later, one of them recalled to an enquiry how his family had lived mainly on boiled peas, turnips and cabbage [HC 1881: 527]. The landlords, clergy and other notables, as well as shopkeepers, apparently had sufficient money to pay the higher prices for food. Finally, landless labourers in the region had a good deal of waged employment, with recourse to assistance under the Poor Law when work was unavailable. Thus, in the town and rural hinterland of Thomastown, the number on "outdoor relief" in 1847 and 1848 remained at or below the low figure of 200, that is, no more than two percent of the population.<sup>13</sup> The key factor at this time, and throughout most of the Famine, was that unemployment and destitution were immeasurably relieved because a railway was being constructed from Kilkenny city south to Waterford, through Thomastown. Large numbers of skilled workers (such as masons and carpenters) and unskilled labourers were employed. Night shifts became common, and the railway company's report for 1847 noted that «the infliction [of] scarcity» was «removed from the localities through which ... construction passes». Labourers were even «recruited from as far away as county Wexford».<sup>14</sup> By early 1850, over £.300,000 had been spent by both state and private investors [KM, 1 June 1850]. Although it is not known what proportion of this was paid out in wages, it is safe to say that railway construction, together with employment on local gentry estates, enabled the majority of artisans and labourers to cope outside the workhouse and without outdoor relief. Only after 1848, when railway construction ended, did the numbers on outdoor relief in the locality increase to more than 500, that is, to four or five percent of the population.

In this context, it seems that a key aspect of the Famine in southern county Kilkenny was not famine per se but "fever". First reported by the press in May 1847, the *Moderator* noted that "contagious fever is very prevalent in the rural areas". Typhus apparently began in late 1846, causing 5,000 deaths in the county while cholera appeared in 1848 and «caused a number of deaths».<sup>15</sup> The fever hospital in Kilkenny city, administered by the

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<sup>13</sup> "Outdoor relief" consisted of payments by the Poor Law authority to people living in their own homes and assessed as destitute. "Indoor relief" required the destitute to enter and be materially supported in the workhouse. As of 1845, Poor Law regulations required the destitute to be given only indoor relief inside the workhouse but, as was the case generally in Ireland by 1847, the Kilkenny workhouse was grossly overcrowded and the Poor Law Commissioners allowed outdoor relief. In either case, costs were met from local property taxes. At this time, Thomastown had no workhouse and its destitute had to go to Kilkenny city workhouse, 20 kilometers miles away. No figures are available for people from the Thomastown area who entered the workhouse since the origins of inmates were not recorded. The numbers on outdoor relief were given in annual reports of the Poor Law Board. We take this as a key indicator because the distance to the workhouse in Kilkenny city would have inclined Thomastown people to remain at home if outdoor relief was available.

<sup>14</sup> Gerard Doyle, Thomastown: personal papers, c. 1940. This comment was based on a story told him by his father who had spoken with a Famine survivor in the 1890s.

<sup>15</sup> This was stated by Thomas P. O'Neill in a lecture, "The Famine in Kilkenny", at the Irish National Library for the Kilkenny Archaeological Society in 1960. He did not give nor have we found confirming evidence for his statements.

Poor Law guardians,<sup>16</sup> admitted 1,766 patients with dysentery between March and July of 1847. No death figures were given. The Kilkenny Poor Law guardians requested the Commissioners of Health, seated in Dublin, to build seven more hospitals in the county. By 1849, five were operating. The one in Thomastown accommodated 40 patients. However, fever was not serious enough to warrant mention in the 1849 reports by the county's various Poor Law boards, and the *Moderator* of March 7th said that cholera «cases are of daily occurrence but the epidemic has not spread to any alarming extent». It seems therefore that "fever" had probably peaked in 1847, that cholera only developed near the end of the Famine, and that disease was scarcely a major factor thereafter.

In general, the sketchiness, paucity and patterning of newspaper reports, and the absence of detail on local potato crops, distress and deaths, are highly suggestive. The *Moderator* in those years carried more reports on potato failures and severe distress in other parts of Ireland and on the continent than it did on local conditions. It occasionally provided, however, a comparative viewpoint. Concerning the 1846 crop failure which was notably disastrous in western Ireland, the paper copied a report from the *Dublin Evening Post* which stated that potato failure in County Kilkenny was less severe than «anywhere south or west of Dublin» [KM, 2 September 1846]. Concerning the 1847 crop, the *Moderator* asserted that «badly off as we are in Kilkenny it would appear that our condition is enviable as compared with other districts in our unfortunate country» [KM, 29 January 1848].

The clear implications are that the Famine, except for some bouts of fever, was not severe in southern Kilkenny, and that this was in part because of particular conditions there: railway building, local employment, alternate foods (grains, root crops, legumes and fish), and intervention by the state. Indeed, estimates of "excess mortality"<sup>17</sup> place County Kilkenny amongst the third of Irish counties which suffered least. We would suggest that were such estimates based only on south Kilkenny, thus ignoring the greater severity in the north and west of the county and in Kilkenny city, they would likely mirror those in the adjacent counties to the east, Carlow and Wexford, the two counties in Ireland with the lowest rates of excess mortality during the Famine.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless,

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<sup>16</sup> The 1828 Poor Law divided the country into "unions", that is, administrative units governed by a board of Poor Law guardians, partly elected from amongst local ratepayers (usually farmers) and partly appointed (usually gentry). They were responsible for setting rates and administering poor relief in their areas. Until 1850, Thomastown was part of Kilkenny city union.

<sup>17</sup> Excess mortality is «a residual ... [obtained] by comparing the estimated population of 1846 with the officially reported population of 1851 after first accounting for births, emigration and internal migration» [Donnelly 1989: 351]. Details are given in Mokyr [1983: 263-68].

<sup>18</sup> Similarly, to the immediate south of County Kilkenny, in eastern County Waterford, potato failure and human distress were relatively less severe. The western part of County Waterford suffered greatly, however, in much the same way as County Cork further west [Hearne 1995: 60 and *passim*].

the Famine years were not without impact. The Famine occurred at a time when both the state and market were expanding dramatically both their presence and imperatives in the locality. We believe that it is this historical conjuncture in the context of the locality which can form the basis of a new narrative and research agenda.

### The Incursion of the State

#### *Before the famine: the "culture of dearth"*

Throughout the early nineteenth century, and probably before, the labouring poor were considered a natural part of the social topography of southern County Kilkenny. So too were the periodic occurrences of famine and near-famine which resulted from economic depression, unemployment, and partial failures of the potato crop. In such a context, members of the locally-resident gentry<sup>19</sup> sometimes perceived that poverty and hunger had intensified beyond prevailing and expected levels. That is, they perceived a crisis. Because they believed that they had moral and practical responsibility to provide charitable assistance to those who had become destitute for exceptional reasons at exceptional times, they made arrangements, amid great publicity, to alleviate the distress.

This "culture of dearth"<sup>20</sup> is discernible throughout the early nineteenth century. In 1816, for example, following the boom conditions of the Napoleonic wars, post-war depression was exacerbated by the decline of the Kilkenny textile industry. The *Moderator* (13 February 1816) reported that «distress is unquestionably unparalleled», adding that «we are confident that it is only temporary». Nothing was done. By May, however, crisis amongst the "labouring manufacturers" was finally recognised. A county relief fund was set up, subscriptions made, and material assistance provided to labourers. Such charity as part of public, gentry beneficence soon lapsed, however, only to be revived again when, in 1820, another crisis was acknowledged. The *Moderator* reported in January that a «highly respectable meeting» was held to devise «the best means of affording relief».

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<sup>19</sup> We use the term "gentry" to refer to landowners and "notables" (officials, professionals, manufacturers). Despite the nationalist stereotype, the majority of landlords were resident in southern county Kilkenny at the time.

<sup>20</sup> We borrow this term from Vincent [1992: 84]. In introducing the concept of the "culture of dearth", Vincent's focus was the particular situation in County Fermanagh in 1847. There, the local landlords and gentry came into direct conflict with the state's agents and bureaucracy as the Poor Law institutions became, under state direction, the principal means for dealing with the increasing numbers of destitute resulting from potato failures. In some contrast to southern County Kilkenny, the Fermanagh gentry, at that time, had not yet been constrained to collude with state officials and to accept the dominant role of the state. Also in some contrast to Thomastown were the much greater severity of famine conditions, the division of the non-Catholic population into Presbyterians (urban) and Anglicans (rural), and the nature of the pre-famine, agrarian economy with its very large numbers of small farmers, its migratory labourers, its potato "truck" system, and its extensive land subdivisions. This latter point is discussed below.

Parish committees were appointed «to collect subscriptions» and «several Gentlemen ... subscribed liberally» (27 January 1820). These actions, wrote the newspaper's editor, should «convince the lower orders that their distresses are not unheeded by those of their fellow citizens to whom providence has been more liberal».

Such gentry charity at exceptional times was not, however, universally given. Those who merited relief were the "many industrious, prudent, sober families amongst us", that is, those who, through no fault of their own, were unemployed or ill and so unable to obtain enough food and clothing. Thus, in the 1820 crisis, the gentry relieved only the worthy poor and not, it was made clear, the "street beggars" or the idle. How the worthy were identified (or if they were, in practice) is not known. What is known is that, from the gentry's perspective, the moral and material responsibility of the gentry in a crisis had to be matched by the moral worthiness of those who were helped.

This culture of dearth, then, rationalised hierarchy while simultaneously allowing the gentry to monitor the "lower classes" and educate them to proper behaviour and to accepting their condition. This culture also differentiated not only the worthy poor from the unworthy but the poor from all others as well as the able-bodied from the disabled. Thus, when crisis was again acknowledged, in 1830, a new "charitable fund" was organised in Thomastown. «Gentlemen ... contributed 5 to 2 pounds and ... *other inhabitants of the town* from 2 to 10 shillings each» [KJ, 3 July 1830; our italics]. With these funds, 60 labourers were employed on street repairs, receiving cash wages with which to buy food. Bread and soup were distributed free to the aged and infirm.

Another feature of the culture of dearth was made explicit in 1837 when the *Journal* reported the next crisis (25 October 1837). At that time, the Thomastown Benevolent Society was founded «for the relief of the destitute poor». Typically, the Society's rules prescribed that assistance could not be given to the idle or to those who «misbehaved in a moral or religious sense». Additionally, the rules aimed to ensure only the most basic standard of living: charity should provide only the «necessaries of life» such as were obtained by «the *poorest* who support themselves by their own industry» (our italics).

Thus the poor were a permanent and unquestioned part of the social landscape as was the gentry's obligation to provide intermittent, charitable relief at certain times. Then, in 1840, a harsh winter, high commodity prices, and unemployment, particularly among weavers, combined to produce a major crisis. The *Journal* reported that «it is gratifying to see the resident nobility and gentry of the county in their several districts coming forward with such true benevolence to the relief of the poor» (1 January 1840). They were led by the Marquis of Ormonde and Lady Ormonde, of the most distinguished county family. In addition to blankets and clothing, monies were collected to buy potatoes to be sold at cost price as well as coal and straw «to be dispensed in small quantities at half price». As the crisis deepened in February, the *Journal* called upon «the wealthy and the great» to contribute more funds for relief and chastised those who refused (12 February

1840). Examples were reported of "good landlords" who accepted their obligations and subscribed. By July, and with a potential potato failure looming, the *Journal* noted that the various local relief committees in the county could no longer provide cheap food but had to give free food for those increasing numbers who could not obtain waged employment (1 July 1840).

It may be too extreme to say that after this crisis, the gentry became complacent about the poverty and hunger of so many labouring families in their parishes and districts. However, a sense seems to have developed that the successive crises of the previous decades had been weathered with some success and that this was largely because of the voluntary intervention of the gentry. However crudely and inadequately, the *ad hoc*, local provision of relief during times of crisis had worked. At other times, it was the lot of the poorer classes to live at a level which was little above destitution - at least until economic conditions improved and employment increased. However, some premonition was emerging in the early 1840s that conditions were altering and that the solutions embodied in the culture of dearth might no longer be sufficient. For example, the 1840 crisis moved the editor of the *Moderator* to observe: «Such is the state of our poor people - their future existence depends upon the success of the potato crop» so that «if it succeeds they will be able to drag out a comfortable existence for another year» but «if it fails they will be again precipitated into all the horrors of Famine» (22 August 1840). Two years later, the editor again told its mainly gentry readers that more serious distress might occur, as had happened in some areas in the west of Ireland, if food supplies fell and if the "peasantry" had no means to obtain what was available. Threat was also said to lie in the possibility of potato failure. Because of this, public subscriptions were needed, the newspaper claimed, against the «*habitual recurrence* of such calamities» [KM, 11 June 1842, our italics].

This perceptual move from seeing the need for charity during periodic crises to the idea of relief as an ongoing necessity because of perpetual crisis was limited in its immediate impact, however. This was because, as the *Moderator* reported on 11 June 1840, the problem did not lie with the «landlords, gentry, and clergy» since the «world does not produce a more liberal or benevolent class». Instead, the fault lay with the politics and religion of the "peasantry" and, clearly, the gentry could do nothing about that. Thus, despite changing perceptions, the partial failure of the potato crop in county Kilkenny in the summer of 1845 was, in typical fashion, initially seen as a minor problem: not a crisis, only another temporary food shortage. The county newspapers carried no reports of local potato failure in the summer of 1845. In September, the *Moderator* reported potato disease in Europe and America (17 and 24 September 1845) and, on October 29, it reported a failure in Cork and severe blight in Belgium, Switzerland and Jersey. However, the situation was by then considered sufficiently serious by some to propel a meeting of county landowners, chaired by the Marquis of Ormonde. However, a local Tory MP

asserted that crop damage was only mild and that little could or should be done. Although some participants disagreed on both counts, the meeting passed a motion that the severity of the blight had been exaggerated. A committee was set up to make enquiries [KM, 29 October 1845].

The *Journal*, too, had little to say about potato failure, but editorial opinion was that it was not serious. The paper reported a second meeting of "the county" in November at which the committee of enquiry reported "progressive" potato disease but recommended no action until a government commission reported (22 November 1845). The *Journal* continued to hold the opinion that there was no disease, only partial failure due to bad weather. Thus, both sets of newspaper readers were told that there was no special worry that winter. The culture of dearth was seemingly intact although, by this time, the referral to a government commission for local knowledge, alongside the notion that the gentry could not be responsible for endemic distress, suggests that new developments were in train, namely, the growing presence of the state alongside the declining responsibility of the gentry.

#### *The state after 1815: local experiences of coercion and regulation*

It generally has been accepted that, during the nineteenth century, political economists whose views were "against government intervention in Ireland" had major impact on public opinion and economic policy. Thus, "the notion grew that *laissez-faire* was the best cure for poverty" [O'Gráda 1993: 126]. From this fact, it is often assumed that *laissez-faire* typified state policy in general. However, in southeastern Ireland after 1815, the state was increasingly present in daily local life. This was part of a process of state incursion which took place in two contested sites: the means of violence and the means of administration.<sup>21</sup>

Pre-Famine Ireland has generally been seen as a very violent place.<sup>22</sup> Although violence in the southeast was only sporadic in both time and space, the response of the state and the media was of growing concern and intervention. This reaction, along with an emerging sense among the Kilkenny gentry that violence was endemic and everywhere, slowly created the belief that all Ireland was in imminent crisis [Gulliver and Silverman

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<sup>21</sup> It has been noted that, in comparison with England, «the growth of central government proceeded steadily, even relentlessly» in early nineteenth century Ireland. For, «to strengthen its grip on Ireland, the English Government, between 1786 and 1838 inaugurated a number of centralised schemes in the area of public order, welfare, planning, and education» [Palmer 1988: 25-26]. Thus, «in contrast to the British, Irish government was remarkable for the extent to which centralisation, uniformity, inspection, and professionalism spread throughout the system before 1850» [MacDonagh 1977: 196]. The mirror image of this was «the collapse of local government and local initiative» [Palmer 1988: 26].

<sup>22</sup> See, for example, Clark [1979: 66] and Palmer [1988: 45-56].

1994: 112-52]. It was a process of state penetration *cum* altering consciousness which was apparent, early on, with the passing of a Peace Preservation Act in 1814. The Act was clearly an attempt by the state to extend its jurisdiction by establishing a locally-paid police force to operate in "proclaimed areas", that is, in districts/baronies in which violence was assessed as rife. Kilkenny landlords and gentry, in their role as magistrates, were quick to recognise the potential of this Act. As early as 1816, in the face of occasional agrarian outrages, they urged «respectable farmers and good peasantry» to avoid behaviour which would cause them to proclaim the county [KM, 4 April 1816]. Within eight years, they had grown more decisive and, alongside, the state provided additional means. Thus, during the agrarian disturbances of the early 1820s, the policing functions under the 1814 Act were augmented by an 1822 Insurrection Act that «provided for dusk-to-dawn curfews, punishment for oath-taking, the extension of summary trial without jury ... and terms of transportation for offenders in proclaimed areas» [Hay and Snyder 1989: 12]. By May 1824, all but two baronies in County Kilkenny had been proclaimed under the Act by local, gentry magistrates. Because the application of the Insurrection Acts had been discretionary, it had attuned the gentry to the potential for control which inhered in more centralised coercive measures while, in turn, making government agents believe that there was need for greater intervention. Thus, 1822 saw another coercive Act. It established a compulsory, county Constabulary with inspectors and constables provided by the administration in Dublin, under the nominal direction of local magistrates. This constabulary was «expressly organised as a civil force on military lines, a substitute for unavailable troops» and for what were perceived by state agents to be «the inadequacies of the ... Irish lay magistracy». By 1823, «a force of 4,500 men ... was supplementing the military establishment of 20,000 troops» [Hay and Snyder 1989: 12].

Then, in October 1830, in County Kilkenny and spreading rapidly, unusually severe violence (arson, banditry, homicide) erupted. It «continued intermittently through most of the southern part of the country» until the mid-1830s. Labelled the Tithe War, historians have found its causes in the opposition to the tithing system and in the earlier campaign for Catholic emancipation<sup>23</sup> which «raised ... political consciousness» [O'Hanrahan 1990: 481-82]. It likely also was a response to escalating state coercion over the previous two decades, to the sense of crisis which had been mounting since 1814, and to the growing collusion by local gentry magistrates with state repression.

The violence of the Tithe War was rapidly quashed by even greater violence perpetrated by the state. Police numbers were dramatically increased [KJ, 20 April 1831] and

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<sup>23</sup> Tithes were dues paid to a protestant clergyman by all land holders in his parish, irrespective of their religion. This subsidy was increasingly resented by Catholics, especially after the successful campaign for Catholic emancipation which culminated in a British parliamentary act in 1829, allowing Catholics to hold land and public office.



monies were liberally spent to support them. For example, the 1833 Spring Assizes for the county, which set the tax rates, made a formal demand for the very large amount of £15,608 to pay police costs, prosecutions, and compensation for malicious injury to property. Troops too were used. They were located in most towns and their movements, duly reported in detail by the press, clearly were intended to provide a caution for some and a sense of security for others.<sup>24</sup>

By 1835, in most of southern Kilkenny, the violence in both town and country had ended. Except for an occasional and quickly-suppressed outburst, it never came back. Later major outbreaks of violence in Ireland only lightly touched the region.<sup>25</sup> In other words, by the mid-1830s, through the Tithe War, the state had co-opted the Kilkenny gentry and, in so doing, had appropriated for itself the means of violence.

However, the state had not depended entirely on coercion and gentry collusion. The Tithe War ended also because ameliorative legislation blunted many complaints. Indeed, such non-economic, administrative intrusions had pre-dated the War. Certainly they continued with greater intensity after. In fact, people's experiences of the growing presence of the state in non-coercive as well as in violent capacities had likely contributed to the violence of the early 1830s in the first instance. In any case, such experiences certainly inclined people, of all classes, to accede to the primacy of the state in other affairs.

Administrative intrusions, as seen from the perspective of Thomastown, related to transport, law, local trade, and local government. From the mid-eighteenth century, for example, the state was involved in public works. An ill-fated canal to link Kilkenny city to the sea, via Thomastown, consumed a good deal of public money and fostered decades of efforts, from landlords as well as notables and shopkeepers, to have the state revive the project [Silverman 1992: 988-1011]. In 1804, when the Irish Grand Canal was completed and a navigable link provided between Dublin and the river Barrow, the impact on Thomastown, which suffered a severe decline in its own role as a transshipping depot on the river Nore,<sup>26</sup> was clearly linked in people's minds to state intervention. Indeed, local efforts by gentry and shopkeepers to secure public funding to resuscitate the town's navigation continued well into the 1840s. The state, through public works, was clearly visible throughout the early nineteenth century.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Reports in KJ, 20 April 1831 and 15 May 1833, and in KM, 18 February 1832 and 3 March 1833.

<sup>25</sup> For example, the so-called Land War (1879-82), waged by tenant farmers against landlords, and the War of Independence (1919-21), against the British government.

<sup>26</sup> Located at the head of inland navigation on the river Nore, Thomastown had long been a transshipping depot linking Kilkenny city to maritime ports on the south coast. After 1804, the river Barrow, running roughly parallel some ten miles to the east, provided navigation northwards to Dublin as well as southwards to the sea.

<sup>27</sup> A common view of road building in the early nineteenth century was that it not only improved Ireland's infrastructure but also, by keeping surplus labour busy, constrained rural violence. In 1833, for example, a *Journal* editorial (24 July) suggested that the employment provided by building a canal through southern

The state also penetrated through the law. In 1828, Thomastown town was given a new primary court (petty sessions) administered by local gentry in their role as magistrates. This eliminated the court of the Thomastown Corporation which had been part of town government since the seventeenth century.<sup>28</sup> A few years before, the town had become a seat for a secondary court (quarter sessions). By the late 1830s, the state also had inspectors of weights and measures visiting local shops and charging defaulters at the petty sessions as a mode of supervising the retail trade.

Indigenous local government too was penetrated, and gradually appropriated. For example, the 1838 Poor Law incorporated places such as Thomastown within regional administrative units. In 1840, an Act allowed ratepayers of town Corporations, such as that of Thomastown, to elect local commissioners to levy rates and carry out local works. In other words, local government and new functions came from the state. The state could also take them away. In 1841, the Irish Municipal Reform Act abolished most Corporations in Ireland, including Thomastown's. Local jurisdiction over urban public works and taxation was handed to grand juries which were controlled by a geographically-dispersed set of gentry. The town thus lost its local government to the same regional elite which had colluded with state violence and which had gained from the displacement of its local court.

Local economies too were affected by the state, and people knew this. Newspapers reported, for example, in 1826, that the «introduction of foreign flour» compelled the «millers of County Kilkenny ... to petition parliament» in protest [KI, 8 December 1826]. In 1828, the public commons in two nearby parishes were enclosed/privatised and in the late 1830s [KM, 9 April and 22 October, 1828], the state set up Loan Funds to end «the pernicious system of money-lending at rates of enormous interest as practised by small usurers throughout Ireland». By 1842, County Kilkenny had 17 loan societies and over £51,000 had been lent to more than 16,000 borrowers [IUP 1843, xxviii: 29].

All this points to an expanding state administration which underwrote the growing coercion which had reached its apogee by the mid-1830s. New laws on numerous issues (such as flour imports, courts, trading practices, land enclosures, loan funds) were applied locally and experienced locally. Indeed, just prior to the first potato failure in 1845, government valuers could be seen throughout county Kilkenny surveying all real estate properties in detail and preparing the way for a rationalised tax base. Kilkenny people of all classes, in other words, had experienced the state in its administrative and coercive roles.

### *The famine years: the state and the culture of dearth*

Prior to the onset of the Famine, there had developed a growing collusion of local elites

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County Kilkenny would cure agrarian outrage.

<sup>28</sup> A description of Thomastown Corporation is in Silverman [1995].

with the state, - with its intrusively coercive measures and its administrative imperatives. This inevitably came to impinge on the moral and material bases of the locally-based culture of dearth. However, it was through the exigencies created by the Famine that this process achieved a new level of consolidation.

At the end of 1845, the county gentry were only mildly worried about potato supplies, unemployment and distress. The British government, however, was more concerned. While refusing to interfere with the market, it accepted the need to take public action to deal with growing distress. A Relief Commission, based in Dublin, was established in November 1845 to organise public works and so to provide employment and cash for the poor. In addition, other Commissions and their officials - for the Poor Law, for Public Works and for Health - exercised increasing responsibilities in the field of welfare. Thus, while the local gentry failed to mobilise, the state began to set out policies, rules, and a bureaucracy to deal with hunger, destitution, and disease. This intervention, which continued throughout the Famine, comprised a process through which the state increasingly marginalised the voluntary, material mechanisms which underlay the culture of dearth.

If we reasonably assume that the *Moderator* represented gentry opinion, full acknowledgement of a crisis was slow to come in county Kilkenny. On March 4, 1846, the paper declared that famine was «enormously exaggerated» and simply enjoined «the country party» to persuade the House of Commons to assess «the alleged distress». Yet, in the same issue was a contradictory report from the Kilkenny Poor Law guardians, with its gentry majority over farmers, which stated that people who subsisted on potatoes «will not have a supply for the next two months»; nor was there seed to plant. In the face of such contradictory sentiments amongst the gentry, it was ultimately the policies and demands of the British state which moulded local gentry perceptions and actions. They were ordered, as members of grand juries, to provide proposals for public works, to form local relief committees to implement employment and food provision, and to strike local property taxes to pay the costs. Thus, although the gentry occasionally made voluntary contributions to the costs of relief, it was state policies which directly mobilised and incorporated them. The state bureaucracy used the gentry who dominated the committees and juries through which relief was organised and who (together with farmers and shopkeepers) paid the taxes. The gentry had already become accustomed to colluding with the state, and they now accepted both policy initiatives and supervision from officials. No opposition to or criticism of government action was reported in either county newspaper. Nor did the gentry protest when, in August 1846, the Board of Works appropriated the powers of the grand juries in proposing new public works in addition to supervising them.<sup>29</sup> The gentry again acquiesced when government ended the public works program and began

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<sup>29</sup> This act was 9 & 10 Victoria, chapter.107; KM, 28 August 1846.

outdoor relief (soup kitchens) in the spring of 1847. Finally, that the gentry deferred almost entirely to state administration is apparent from the fact that few landlords in Thomastown parish mortgaged their lands during 1847-8 to secure improvement loans made available by the Commissioner of Public Works as part of famine relief.<sup>30</sup>

What all this suggests is a clear marginalisation of the material mechanisms which underlay the culture of dearth. Yet, its moral basis persisted. In 1846, for example, a protestant clergyman hoped that «the poor people would manifest a fitting sense of gratitude to the gentlemen who had done so much for them» [KM, 23 June 1846]. This morality was articulated because protest was then emerging and, alongside, the gentry fear of violence. That autumn, rioting and pillaging of bread shops were reported from several parts of southern County Kilkenny, along with highway robberies [KM, 23 September, 12 and 23 December 1846]. A Thomastown flour mill owner, in a letter to Dublin Commissioners, complained of threats to his mills and asserted that «the town has been in possession of a riotous mob». Other mills in the south of the county were also thought to be threatened and were given police protection [KM, 19 September 1846].

The threats and the protests were quickly quashed, but they encouraged even further gentry collusion with the state, more acquiescence to state control, and renewed reiteration of the morality of social hierarchy. Thus, in 1847, landlords accepted, apparently without protest, the new governmental focus on the 1838 Poor Law institutions as the principal means for dealing with distress, even though most had earlier disapproved of them and even though it meant an increase in property taxes.<sup>31</sup> By this time, however, the gentry had little or no choice. They continued to set tax rates but this was subject to the detailed supervision - often the orders - of the Poor Law Commission officials in Dublin. It must be more than mere coincidence that, after early 1847, as the autonomy of gentry decision-making gave way to state bureaucracy, the *Moderator* carried very few reports about the gentry's participation in relief administration. News of other gentry activities continued as usual but, thereafter, news about potato shortages, poverty and distress came largely from the reports of the county's several Poor Law boards of guardians. Some of the landlords (notably, the Marquis of Ormonde) remained as seemingly passive Poor Law guardians

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<sup>30</sup> All such government loans had to be recorded as mortgages in the Deeds Registry, Dublin. Only six of the 53 townlands/subdivisions in Thomastown parish were mortgaged. The amount raised was £ 2,775 through eight loans - a relatively small sum. Landowners appear to have been inactive when new opportunities were offered, probably because they were, by this time, leaving Famine relief actions to state agencies.

<sup>31</sup> The *Moderator* editorialised in 1847 (September 18) that there would be resistance to the payment of higher taxes, but we have not found reports that this actually occurred, unlike the situation in County Fermanagh [Vincent 1992: 77]. Indeed, when the *Moderator* reported an eight per cent shortfall in the tax collection for 1848 (29 February 1849), this was attributed not to refusals to pay but to the fact that farms had become untenanted. Reports from the county's Poor Law unions for 1848 stated that there had been no opposition to paying property taxes [KM, 2 May 1849].

and as members of local relief committees. However, the entire board of the Kilkenny Union was dissolved for inefficiency by the commissioners and replaced by government officials in February 1848. No protest was reported, but the minutes of the board noted that the Duke and another landlord assisted in the transfer of responsibilities. During the Famine, the only report of independent gentry action was when the government offered to provide relief funds to match local, voluntary contributions. The county gentry sought actively to promote the policy. In May 1847, the *Moderator* reported a meeting of «landlords and their tenants» in Thomastown, where they urged farmers to participate. This was not the culture of dearth operating, however. It was, rather, an effort to use a state policy to avoid or limit another tax increase.

In 1845, an old and central idea was that landlords and notables, that is, the gentry, should take voluntary collective and public action when food shortage, poverty and distress reached a crisis point. Within a year, this cultural expectation had been gutted as the gentry colluded with, and eventually gave way completely to, the state's policies and its officials. This could be interpreted as resulting from the enormity of the poverty and distress in those years. Perhaps in part this is correct. However, the idea that the state could legitimately make incisive penetration was already extant well before 1845. That it was able to continue to do so most dramatically during the Famine, by seizing the initiative and marginalising the local gentry, enhanced in turn its bureaucratic forms of control.<sup>32</sup> Charity from the gentry to the deserving poor, with its marked moral overtones, was thereby transformed into a notion of relief as a public responsibility. Indeed, the new Poor Law Act of 1847, applicable specifically to Ireland, recognised that the destitute had a right to public support. Although the financial burden for this was laid primarily on the occupants of real estate in the locality, namely, the landlords, notables, farmers, and shopkeepers, the new entitlements of the destitute, and the administration of those rights, were now to be closely monitored by agents of the state.

In asserting this conclusion, we cannot assess how far and with what degree of efficiency the state bureaucracy was able to ameliorate conditions of poverty and distress in the Thomastown region between 1845 and 1849. Rather, we are concluding that the already encroaching state bureaucracy penetrated decisively, as it attempted, however inadequately, to deal with the tremendous crisis of those years.

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<sup>32</sup> The new power of the state persisted after the Famine years. Although the local gentry resumed their control of grand juries and Poor Law boards, they worked strictly under the detailed supervision of state officials. This is clearly revealed in the minutes and correspondence books of the Thomastown Poor Law board. Moreover, through legislation, the state acquired increasing intervention and prescription as the nineteenth century continued. Indeed, by about 1880, the gentry had virtually resigned from local government as the conflict between Irish nationalists and the British state took precedence.

## The Incursion of the Market and the Local Economy

### *Agrarian culture and economy before and after the famine*

A massive emigration from southern County Kilkenny occurred during the Famine years. By the 1851 census, population had fallen dramatically from what it had been in 1841. In Thomastown parish, it had fallen by 27 per cent. It has generally been assumed that this decline was mainly an attrition of the "poorer classes" - the labourers, "cottiers"<sup>33</sup> and small-holders. Indeed, in the decades prior to the Famine, local people knew that the living conditions of these groups had been deteriorating, and they also knew why.

As expressed by witnesses from southern County Kilkenny at a governmental Inquiry in 1833,<sup>34</sup> it was caused by a European-wide, economic depression after 1815 through which both labourers and farmers were becoming more firmly tied to the export market. Farmers, with high rents fixed before 1815, now faced declining commodity prices and so cut back on labour. Labourers in turn experienced severe unemployment and falling wages. Amongst better-off farmers, incomes declined, credit became expensive and, as a result, «a large increase in the quantity of every kind of agricultural produce» was «brought to market for export to England, because the increasing poverty of farmers obliges them to live more ... upon potatoes and to sell almost the whole of the meat, corn, butter, etc. which they consumed formerly». Other aspects of the wider economy also were relevant: «more cattle, by ten to one, are now fattened for export than formerly» because of «the introduction of stall-feeding, ... the general improvement of agriculture, ... the facility of conveyance to England by steam, and ... the hardness of the times». In other words, agricultural technology advanced, productivity increased, and the export market flourished as living standards fell [Gulliver and Silverman 1995: 102-10]. Thus, as early as 1827, the *Kilkenny Independent* reported that «emigration ... through Waterford» reached «an unprecedented extent»; and certainly by the early 1830s, extreme distress was visible among the "poorer classes".

Witnesses to the Inquiry in 1833 were aware that this distress, caused by falling wages and unemployment, was exacerbated by an increased population; but they also saw that it had begun to decline through emigration. The birth rate too was rising less rapidly. Thomastown parish records show that during 1818-1828, the number of births was almost nine percent higher than between 1798 and 1808. However, in the 1829-1839 period, the number of births was only 1.6 percent higher than in the previous decade.

The problems caused by the market and the superabundance of labour were not, however, exacerbated by a feature which typified the agrarian economy in the west of Ireland,

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<sup>33</sup> A cottier was a "constant labourer" for a particular farmer. He received a small bit of subsistence ground as well as a cottage.

<sup>34</sup> H.C. 1836, xxxi, xxxii and xxxiii. Quotations are taken from Appendices to this report.

namely a multiplicity of tiny holdings created by subdivision and subletting. Instead, by the early 1830s according to Inquiry witnesses, few large-scale middlemen held land and, certainly in 1845, such subletting as occurred was carried out only by larger, viable farmers.<sup>35</sup> In that latter year, in 37 rural townlands/sections of Thomastown parish, almost 84 percent of the holdings were held directly from landlords. Fewer than 17 percent of the holdings were rented from a landlord's tenant, and very few tenants of tenants rented out holdings to others in turn. Moreover, of the holdings rented from a landlord's tenant, over 70 percent were larger than an acre. In other words, subdivision and fragmentation of land holdings did not underlie poverty, distress, and deteriorating living standards in the Thomastown area. Instead, the impact of the commodities market on an enlarged population was key. It created two problems. First, it exacerbated the subsistence problem for the landless, particularly for those in the town and its peri-urban areas. Second, it created a "land hunger" that was related to a particular perception of landlessness current at the time.

The landless labourer who was not a cottier subsisted by casual waged work (on the roads, during harvests) and by renting ground (conacre) for growing potatoes.<sup>36</sup> In the 1830s, according to Inquiry witnesses, conacre was in fact used by people of varying status-classes in Thomastown: «It is not want of employment which disposes a man to resort to conacre, even tradesmen in towns take it». However, with growing impoverishment caused by increasing unemployment and falling wages, the use of conacre became increasingly important for labourers' subsistence, «especially near towns and villages, where there are the largest number of partially employed». This fact formed the basis for the perception of the labourer, by himself and by others, prior to the Famine. In this perception, the "labourer" was a "landless agriculturalist". Why? Because, according to informants at the time, «nothing offers them so certain a means of subsistence as land». One labourer said: «A man that has land ... is always sure of a meal of potatoes». A landlord added: «I think they would soon learn to prefer ... wages; but at present their greatest ambition is to get a bit of land». Indeed, said a large farmer, «employment for hire being very precarious, the labourer looks to the possession of land as the only sure mode of existence».

This perception of labourers as landless agriculturalists whose subsistence depended on access to land or conacre, and the superabundance of labour and increasing impoverishment, all conspired to prevent workers from uniting to improve their condition. According to a witness in 1833: «While combinations have existed in all trades, either to check the fall of wages, or absolutely to raise them, such has never been the case among

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<sup>35</sup> Data on landholding are taken from Griffith's 1845 property valuation for County Kilkenny.

<sup>36</sup> Conacre was an eleven-month rental of a small plot for growing potatoes [see Vincent 1992, 1995].

the agricultural labourers of this barony, in consequence of the great numbers who are always eager to accept employment».

These conditions occurred, and meanings were constructed, in the context of an economy which had long been commercialised and which was, at the time, being dramatically penetrated by the international market. Under such conditions too, people were clear about the size of the farming unit that was not only viable but also profitable. In speaking before the Devon Commission of Inquiry in 1845, several County Kilkenny witnesses placed a cut-off point at ten acres. Thus, one large farmer said a small-holder was a man who had less than ten acres, and a landlord noted that «it is a mere struggle to live under ten acres» [H.C. 1845, xxi]. Ten acres divided the "small-holder" from the "farmer", the subsistence cultivator from the commercial farmer. It was a division based on perceptions of efficiency, profitability and viability.

Through these perceptions, a hierarchy of status-class categories<sup>37</sup> existed in pre-Famine Kilkenny: landlords, farmers, small-holders, cottiers, and labourers. The categories reflected differential access to the means of production and, then, differential living standards and prestige. What happened to this rural hierarchy in the aftermath of the Famine? For Thomastown, the answer in brief is that, *in the rural area/townlands*, not very much happened. Prior to the Famine, in 1845, labourers and cottiers formed somewhat less than a third of the rural population as did the small-holders. Farmers (those with ten "valued acres"<sup>38</sup> or more) formed slightly less than 40 percent. The Famine had little effect on this landholding and status-class structure, even though the overall number of rural holders decreased by almost a third between 1845 and 1857. For after the Famine, a third of the holders in the countryside were still landless labourers and cottiers. The proportion of small-holders had declined slightly, by about six percent, to form about a quarter of the rural population, and the proportion of farmers had increased by about three percent to form somewhat over 40 percent. What this meant was that the formation of the status-class hierarchy, and the structure of landholding in Thomastown's rural area, had pre-dated the Famine and had remained virtually intact after it.

This was not the case in the *peri-urban area/townlands* that had long been linked to the urban economy. Directly adjacent to the town with some town streets extending uninterruptedly into them, these townlands contained industrial sites (mills, tannery), cabin

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<sup>37</sup> "Status-classes" are folk categories which designate occupational groups hierarchically.

<sup>38</sup> Because townlands vary in quality of land and value of agricultural output, absolute sizes of holdings are a poor way to analyse agrarian structures. This was recognised in 1845 when Griffith's surveyors assigned a money value to each townland based on the market value of what its output was. For example, the poor lands of Badgerrock townland were valued at 0.15 of a £/pound per acre; in Newtown townland, land was valued at 0.96. Six acres of Badgerrock were thus equivalent to one acre in Newtown. "Valued acreage" is the number of acres held by a person multiplied by the value per acre assigned in 1845.



sites for labourers, and "town fields" for wealthier residents to pasture a horse or two nearby. Because of the ways in which these townlands were linked to both the urban space and the town economy, the nature of differentiation within them reflects something of town life and can be compared with more distinctly rural locales.

In 1845, almost 50 percent of the peri-urban holders had a house without land. They were industrial or casual workers. Small-holders formed slightly less than a third of the holders, as they did in the more rural townlands. However, farmers formed only about a sixth. After the Famine, major changes had occurred. Although the proportion of small-holders remained virtually intact, the landless labouring population had declined dramatically. The proportion of farmers had increased and, along with them, the proportion of cottiers. The peri-urban townlands, in other words, had become more agricultural as the urban-oriented, landless labourers were displaced. The agrarian structure of the peri-urban townlands thus came to resemble more closely that of rural locales - with a population of farmers and cottiers and without its former superabundance of casually employed, landless labourers.

### *The making of the working class*

By precipitating massive emigration, the Famine relieved the superabundance of labour. This had a major impact on the meaning and means of the labouring class as clearer divisions came to separate the relations and interests of the various categories in the status-class hierarchy. A new labouring consciousness and lifestyle emerged as a result. Conacre as a subsistence strategy declined in importance, the issue of the availability of waged work became central as distinct from the availability of land, the "landless agriculturalist" was transformed into a "wage labourer", and a political and individual consciousness emerged amongst working people.

Two examples illustrate this.<sup>39</sup> At Thomastown petty sessions court in early 1849, a caretaker on a local estate charged seven young men with «malicious trespass». All were labourers living in the town. They had played a drum and fife, «with which they made a great noise», by the river next to the big house. The caretaker «remonstrated with them» at the time, saying that the resident gentleman «was indisposed». However, the men threatened him and refused to abate the nuisance, declaring that «from time immemorial a band was allowed to proceed along the river bank from Thomastown, and that the path was of right open to the public». Two leaders were fined two shillings each or 48 hours in the gaol. They chose the latter.

For labouring people, undisguisedly to "give annoyance" to a member of the landlord

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<sup>39</sup> These examples were reported in the *Kilkenny Moderator*, 17 March 1849 and 6 August 1851 respectively.

class, to declare in a courtroom in favor of an old custom, to go to gaol to make the point, and to threaten a gentleman's employee was political behavior as well as boisterous fun. It suggests a degree of strategic leverage, and openness, which would not have been possible in the context of the dependency fostered by the pre-Famine culture of dearth and in pre-Famine conditions of growing impoverishment.

Equally political, visible and novel was a strike which occurred two years later. In August 1851, despite the «hungry season», the «operatives employed in building the Thomastown workhouse» went out on strike when one of them was dismissed. One hundred workers were on that site and such a combination was only possible because labour was no longer abundant and because higher wages had given leverage to workers.<sup>40</sup> The year before, when harvest labour was in short supply and expensive, the *Moderator* noted: «The talk of over-population, and the necessity for emigration ... is a mockery. There are scarcely enough hands left here to perform the labour of the country».

Solutions to such problems were mechanisation and technical innovation. Such solutions, however, both marked and furthered a new polarisation.<sup>41</sup> In August 1858, in Kilkenny city, agricultural labourers combined to demand higher wages at harvest: they "intimidated" workers who tried to accept lower wages and threatened farmers who had new reaping machines or who employed men who used scythes rather than sickles. A «mob ... of about three hundred persons» then went into the countryside and broke several new machines and scythes. Troops and extra police were sent to the city and towns in the county. The violence was halted within two days.

However, the lines were drawn. Several local men were charged at the petty sessions court, but labourer-witnesses refused to identify them as the malefactors. The *Journal* reported that «while the labouring classes are organising on one side, the gentry and the farmers are organising for self defense on the other». The gentry thus lent «their machines to ... farmers to enable them to dispense with the labour of the rioters». The *Moderator* claimed that «because of resolute feeling on the part of the farmers, backed by ... a sufficient military force to sustain them in that resolution, the deluded peasantry must be very soon convinced of the folly of supposing they can prevent the general introduction ... of any improved implement of agriculture».

Enmeshed, of course, in the issues of wage rates and innovation, brought on by labour shortages, was the older fear of violence and a newer fear of labourers and their organised combinations. A new gulf now separated the landed from the landless. Because both

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<sup>40</sup> In 1836, a casual labourer was paid 6d. a day plus food [HC 1836, xxxi, Appendix D: 73-4]. In 1845 the wage was 8d. in winter and 10d. in summer [H.C. 1845 xxi: 287]. The daily wage during the 1850 harvest had risen to 1s.9d. [KM, 21 August 1850].

<sup>41</sup> The following incidents were reported in both the *Kilkenny Moderator* and *Kilkenny Journal*, 11 and 14 August 1858.

gentry and their tenant-farmers controlled land and capital, they were now allied against labour. A new political and class consciousness emerged in southern County Kilkenny as the Famine irrevocably transformed "landless agriculturalists" into wage labourers and irrevocably separated those who had access to land as distinct from those who did not.

#### CONSTRUCTING THE FAMINE IN SOUTHERN COUNTY KILKENNY

We have argued here that the Famine occurred in particular localities in which local, regional and national conditions intersected to create particular outcomes. It was in local places, too, where meanings and interpretations were created. From such premises, and from such micro and inductive perspectives, the topics through which the Famine can be described will differ from the nationalist and/or historiographic agenda. In saying this, we are certainly not suggesting that our particular locality was in any sense typical of all or many other localities. The results of anthropological research should not be taken as typical just as they should not be used to exemplify macro-hypotheses and generalisations. Instead, anthropological studies, as in this instance, may uncover processes and consequences that have not been considered or which have been inadequately emphasised by scholars of the macro or of multiple sites.

In the case described in this paper, we have pointed to the fact that Famine conditions in southern County Kilkenny, in common with other areas in southeastern Ireland, were less severe than elsewhere in the country. Although this has been recognised by historians and economists, its significance and consequences have not been much examined, in contrast with the intensive concern with those areas worst affected by failures of potato crops and famine conditions. Moreover, famine conditions in the Thomastown area were considerably ameliorated by the investment of large amounts of private and public capital. In that context, the coercive and administrative functions and institutions of the British colonial state continued their implacable march forward, virtually displacing the culture of dearth which had informed civil society and which had underlain the charity and ideology of the resident gentry. The moralistic conception of charity was replaced by the notion of the right, governmentally monitored, of the destitute to receive public support. The emigration that was quickened by conditions of poverty and unemployment came from all levels of local society and therefore had limited impact on an agrarian landholding structure which pre-dated the Famine and continued thereafter. There was very little of the subdivision and fragmentation of land holdings stereotypical of the nationalist version of the Famine and of Ireland as a land of poor farmers. What did change, however, was the economic and political condition of labouring people. Labourers ceased to be "landless agriculturalists" and became more aware of their distinction from, and conflict with, gentry and farmers.

Local knowledge and memory of the Famine years in Thomastown were lost in

subsequent generations as the burgeoning nationalist construction of events, causes and consequences undermined the ability of local, person-based memory to coalesce and persist. The homogenised, nationalist story displaced local stories and became an intrinsic part of everyday common sense. Thus, in the same way that the state took over famine relief and local institutions, the contest for that state took over local memory. However, some slight vestiges of local memory remained - in texts and in oral history. Although these did not form a narrative, they did suggest how such a narrative might be constructed by highlighting the concerns and themes which had been relevant to the particular locality. That is, the vestiges of memory, recoverable through intensive, locality-based research, provided a new entry point through which a different, verifiable history could be constructed. Thus, in Thomastown, it was state and market interventions, in association with local social relations and local meanings, that intersected before, during and after the Famine to create a particular local experience of a seminal Irish event. It is through an anthropological approach to these that the seeming historical verities and research agenda surrounding the Great Famine can be modified and augmented.

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