

Yvonne O'Keeffe and Claudia Reese (eds)

NEW VOICES, INHERITED LINES

LITERARY AND CULTURAL REPRESENTATIONS
OF THE IRISH FAMILY



ireimagining land

Irish writers have always been fascinated by the family, sometimes depicting it as a traditional space under threat from external influences, sometimes highlighting the dangers lurking within. More recently, families have been represented as a type of safe haven from a bewildering postmodern world. At the heart of these constructions are questions of power and agency, as well as issues of class, gender, ethnicities and sexualities.

This collection of essays explores literary and cultural representations of the Irish family, questioning the validity of traditional familial structures as well as exploring newer versions of the Irish family emerging in more recent cultural representations. In addition to redefinitions of the nuclear family, the book also considers aspects of family constructions in Irish nationalist discourse, such as the symbolic use of the family and the interaction and conflict between private and public roles. The works and authors discussed range from Famine fiction, Samuel Beckett, Mary Lavin and John McGahern to Anne Enright, Colm Tóibín and Hugo Hamilton.

Yvonne O'Keeffe received her MA and PhD from the University of Limerick, Ireland. Her doctoral research explored the emigrant novels of Mary Anne Sadlier (1820–1903), analysing Sadlier's role in the construction of a transatlantic Irish Catholic identity in North America. Her research interests include representations of gender, identity and the diaspora in Irish fiction.

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New Voices, Inherited Lines

Reimagining Ireland

Volume 47

Edited by Dr Eamon Maher
Institute of Technology, Tallaght



PETER LANG

Oxford • Bern • Berlin • Bruxelles • Frankfurt am Main • New York • Wien

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Introduction

A predominant theme in Irish literature, and indeed in cultural discourse more generally, is the role of the family in Irish society. From the Quirks in Maria Edgeworth's *Castle Rackrent* via the Mulqueens in Kate O'Brien's *The Ante-Room* to the Hegarty family in Anne Enright's *The Gathering*, families and family structures have sustained the interest of most of our literary writers right up to the contemporary period across all genres. Essays in this collection explore literary and cultural representations of the Irish family, and have considered the ways in which Irish families have shaped and been constructed by Irish literature and culture in the modern period.

Just as Irish society as a whole has undergone sweeping changes, in the recent past in particular, so have there been significant reconfigurations in Irish families. Irish writers have always been fascinated by the family, sometimes depicting it as a traditional space under threat from famine and mass emigration, sometimes highlighting the dangers of the family 'cell', and perhaps more recently constructing families as a safe haven from a bewildering postmodern world. At the heart of many of these constructions of the Irish family are questions of power and agency, as well as issues of class, gender, ethnicities and sexualities. This collection provides a forum for questioning whether traditional familial structures are in fact now outdated, and asking whether a new Irish family can be discerned in recent cultural representations, which is perhaps more reflective of contemporary Ireland. In addition to redefinitions of the nuclear family, we have also considered aspects of family constructions in Irish nationalist discourse, e.g. the symbolic use of the family and the interaction and the conflict between private and public roles of the family. An advantage of this particular edited collection is the range of writers it covers; it will be of interest to those scholars who are working on more obscure writers such as Mary Anne Madden Sadlier whilst commemorating the work of well known writers such as Mary Lavin (who celebrated her centenary in 2012).

It also includes essays on Samuel Beckett, one of Ireland's literary treasures, and more contemporary writers such as John McGahern and Colm Tóibín.

This edited collection originated after the postgraduate conference entitled *New Voices: Inherited Lines* which was held at the University of Limerick on 28/29 May 2010. The *New Voices in Irish Criticism* initiative is well-recognised in Ireland among academics in Irish Literary Studies and the Humanities more generally as a valuable venue for postgraduate students to discuss their research. At the conference we had three excellent plenary speakers, all of whom are renowned scholars in the field of Irish Studies: namely, Professor Patricia Coughlan, University College Cork; Anne Fogarty, Professor of James Joyce Studies at University College Dublin and Director of the UCD Centre for Research for James Joyce Studies; and Dr Eamonn Hughes, Assistant Director of the Institute of Irish Studies and Director of Education at the School of English in Queen's University Belfast. The 2007 Booker Prize Winner, Anne Enright, performed an evening reading of her prize-winning novel *The Gathering* which deals with the impact of suicide on family relationships. Discussions from the conference proved most interesting and it soon emerged that there was a need to re-examine the role of the Irish family in literature but from the perspective of emerging scholars who bring with them, new and critical approaches to established themes and theories.

The first two contributions to this collection are explorations of fiction from the Great Irish Famine; Christopher Cusack and Lindsay Janssen look at literary representations of the ways the traditionally close knit Irish family unit came under threat due to disruptive influences at a time of economical and social hardship in late nineteenth-century Ireland. Cusack and Janssen then suggest an understanding of the literary family as a metonym for larger societal structures and a repository of cultural memory. They look at a number of fictional texts by various writers of the post-Famine years who share a representation of the famine as a formative event which, in order to work through the trauma of the disintegration of families, necessitates a re-configuration of family structures, leaving traditional Catholic values behind in order to move on and to adapt to a new life. In her analysis of emigrant novels by Mary Anne Madden Sadlier, Yvonne O'Keeffe shows how the transatlantic Irish author's strong belief in the benefits of

traditional Catholic family values colours her stories about the impact of emigration on both the family left behind as well as the emigrant who forms a new community abroad. Although Sadlier is often dismissed as a sentimental writer, O’Keeffe credits her writing with tackling what would be considered taboo subjects in the nineteenth century such as alcoholism and sexual abuse as Sadlier exposes them as threats to the family cell both at home and abroad.

The strong religious influence on concepts of family and gender roles especially in the Irish context is also the topic of another essay in this collection. Stephanie Eggermont examines the work of New Woman writer George Egerton, whose feminine hybridity allows her not only to scrutinise domestic ideology and to call attention to the clash between the nuclear family ideal and a woman’s maternal instincts in her fiction but also to expose the particular hypocrisy of Irish Catholic families. Proposing an influence of the works of Friedrich Nietzsche on Egerton’s writings, Eggermont demonstrates how Egerton shows the detrimental effect Catholicism has on motherhood and the Irish family in her stories. In a much broader cultural analysis of the status of the family in Ireland, Jack Fennell re-examines the portrayal of the family unit in Irish political discourse. In his essay he develops the argument that a lingering rhetoric of what he terms a ‘siege culture’ reminiscent of de Valera’s Ireland of the early twentieth century, which remains influential in Irish society today, posits an external threat to the family unit, which in turn can have disastrous consequences, as seen in recent extraordinary cases of familial abuse.

In an original approach to Samuel Beckett’s works through the study of his use of a number of distinct recurring objects reminiscent of his own parents’ wardrobe, Julie Bates provides insight into the writer’s complex relationship with his own mother and the consequential representation of maternal characteristics and motherhood. Any exploration of the concept of the family unit invariably leads to its contextualisation in wider societal structures. Recognising the evasiveness of an unambiguous definition of the family as it has been subject to a variety of cultural constructions and continues to evolve, Theresa Wray proposes to look at wider family circles and include extra familial social networks in the discourse on Irish family. Focussing on the short stories of Mary Lavin, she evaluates the representation

of dysfunctional sibling relations, in particular sisters, in comparison to female kinship outside the immediate family that appears to be more accepting and supportive to the individual. In a similar fashion Máire Doyle in her essay examines the narratives of John McGahern in the light of alternatives to the traditional family in post-Independence Ireland. She argues that McGahern, recognising both the family as well as the local community as places of identification for the individual in absence of a functioning society, goes a step further and explores what alternatives there are for the individual who is part of neither of these possible networks. Employing the concept of the orphan, Doyle concentrates on McGahern's exploration of the role family plays in the individual's struggle to find their own place in the world.

Turning to the even more complex set-up of bicultural families, the memoir of Hugo Hamilton provides rich material for the exploration of identity and belonging in the light of migration and hybridity. In her essay Claudia Reese investigates the writer's struggle of coming to terms with his bicultural familial roots, which constitute an obstacle on his way towards an understanding of who he is. Situating the Irish-German boy's story in the wider context of the autobiographical genre in Ireland, Reese proposes yet another dimension to the understanding of the role of family in Irish society. Migration also features prominently in Louise Sheridan's exploration of motherhood in the works of contemporary women writers. Concentrating on a novel by Kate O'Riordan, Sheridan analyses how the woman in migrant narratives is escaping traditional family and gender roles prevalent in Irish society, and in turn experiences alternative ways of motherhood abroad. However, Sheridan also highlights O'Riordan's concerns about the impossibility of the migrant woman to fully liberate herself from the past and family ties, ultimately reaffirming the importance of the family in Irish society. A further exploration of maternal subjectivity is provided by Hannelore Fasching in her analysis of Anne Enright's fictional and non-fictional work questioning the representation of motherhood in contemporary Irish society. She detects a modernised version of traditional gender roles, which dismissed the prescribed idealisation of motherhood of previous times. In addition Fasching looks into the close relationship between motherhood and authorship, arguing for the act of writing as an expression of maternal thinking.

Finally, cultural traditions surrounding death and the significance of the family unit providing support to the grieving individual is the subject of Bridget English's essay considering novels by Colm Tóibín and Anne Enright. Suggesting that Irish approaches to dealing with death and trauma have changed in recent decades of cultural and economical change, she discusses how these novels affirm the necessity to confront the past and family history in order to successfully deal with the loss in the face of death. All of the thought-provoking essays in this collection raise interesting questions demanding considered reflection on the role and place of the Irish family in literature.

CHRISTOPHER CUSACK AND LINDSAY JANSSEN

Death in the Family: Reimagining the Irish Family in Famine Fiction, 1871–1912

The failure of the potato, and consequent famine, is one of those events which come now and then to do the work of ages in a day, and change the very nature of an entire nation at once. It has even already produced a deeper social disorganisation than did the French revolution – greater waste of life – wider loss of property – more than the horrors, with none of the hopes. [...] It has unsettled society to the foundation; deranged every interest, every class, every household.¹

Writing in 1847, the Young Irelander James Fintan Lalor commented on the ways in which the Great Famine (1845–1851) had upset the structure of Irish society. During the Famine, one million died of starvation and disease and another million emigrated,² due to consecutive crop failures and a constellation of adverse political and social forces.³ As such, it is widely considered the formative trauma at the heart of modern Irish history.⁴ Its effects were far-reaching: among other things, it upset the order of Irish agricultural society. The lowest layers of society – agricultural labourers,

- 1 James Fintan Lalor, 'A New Nation: Proposal for an Agricultural Association between the Landowners and Occupiers', in L. Fogarty, ed., *James Fintan Lalor: Patriot & Political Essayist (1807–1849)* (Dublin: Talbot Press, 1918), 8–9.
- 2 David Lloyd, *Irish Culture and Colonial Modernity, 1800–2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 19.
- 3 For a powerful recent analysis of how the Famine came about, see David P. Nally, *Human Encumbrances: Political Violence and the Great Irish Famine* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2011), 3–14.
- 4 Diarmaid Ferriter, *The Transformation of Ireland, 1900–2000* (London: Profile, 2005), 28, 44.

cottiers and small tenant farmers – disappeared almost completely,⁵ and it laid waste to the communal system of landholding known as *clachan* or *rundale*.⁶ Indeed, as David Lloyd states, the Famine caused a ‘terrifying dissolution of social ties’,⁷ disrupting the organisation of Irish society at multiple levels, including that of the family unit. The latter point is borne out among other things by the change in Irish marriage and fertility rates: after the Famine, the Irish married significantly later in life; and although prior to the Famine, Irish population numbers had grown explosively, reproduction rates subsequently dropped to become the lowest in Europe.⁸ Nevertheless, as Timothy P. Foley points out, in Ireland the family continued to be ‘the basic unit of society’⁹ – even legally so, as the Irish Constitution states that ‘[t]he State recognises the Family as the natural primary and fundamental unit group of Society’.¹⁰

A catalyst of great social, demographic and cultural change, the Great Famine is a quintessential theme in Irish cultural memory. Due to its impact, it can be seen as an example of what Jan Assmann calls ‘figures of memory’: ‘fateful events of the past, whose memory is maintained through cultural formation (texts, rites, monuments) and institutional communication (recitation, practice, observance)’.¹¹ Considering its impact on Irish society, as

- 5 Christopher Cusack, ‘Beyond the Emerald Isle: Studying the Irish Atlantic’, *Atlantic Studies* 8/3 (2011), 380.
- 6 Lloyd, *Irish Culture and Colonial Modernity*, 6. For a good historical and anthropological discussion of the *rundale* system see Tom Yager, ‘What Was *Rundale* and Where Did It Come From?’, *Béaloideas* 70 (2002), 153–86.
- 7 Lloyd, *Irish Culture and Colonial Modernity*, 44.
- 8 Mike Cronin, *A History of Ireland* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), 146.
- 9 Timothy P. Foley, ‘Public Sphere and Domestic Circle: Gender and Political Economy in Nineteenth-Century Ireland’, in Margaret Kelleher and James H. Murphy, eds, *Gender Perspectives in 19th Century Ireland: Public and Private Spheres* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1997), 22. See also David Fitzpatrick, ‘Irish Farming Families before the First World War’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 25/2 (1983), 339–74.
- 10 Article 41.1.1, *Constitution of Ireland*. <http://www.taoiseach.gov.ie/attached_files/Pdf%20files/Constitution%20of%20Ireland.pdf> accessed 19 January 2012.
- 11 Jan Assmann, ‘Collective Memory and Cultural Identity’, *New German Critique* 65 (1995), 129.

illustrated by the epigraph of this article, the Irish Famine can be considered a full-fledged cultural trauma, following Jeffrey C. Alexander's definition:

a cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel that they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways.¹²

Extrapolating this argument, in Irish culture the Famine is often rhetorically posited as what Dominick LaCapra calls a 'founding trauma': 'the valorized or intensely cathected basis of identity for an individual or a group'.¹³

The family unit plays a dominant role in Irish society and culture, as is borne out by the current collection. Moreover, the Famine had a profound effect on the Irish family. It is therefore not surprising that representations of family feature prominently in many Irish literary texts which recollect the Great Famine.¹⁴ More specifically, many post-Famine works of prose fiction focus on the ways in which the Famine has affected the integrity of the nuclear family.¹⁵ Due to the effects of mortality and, to a lesser

12 Jeffrey C. Alexander, 'Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma', in Jeffrey C. Alexander et al., *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004), 1.

13 Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 23. Cathexis is a term from Freudian psychoanalysis, used to refer to a pathological focus on a person, idea or event, in this case the Famine.

14 See also Marguérite Corporaal, Christopher Cusack and Lindsay Janssen, eds, *Recollecting Hunger: An Anthology. Cultural Memories of the Great Famine in Irish and British Fiction* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2012). As a very basic quantitative analysis of our anthology shows, the words 'family' or 'families' occur more than sixty times across a selection of thirty-four works of Famine fiction from the period 1847–1921.

15 The aim of this article is not to provide a digest of historiographical scholarship about the family after the Famine. Although we are aware of conflicting arguments regarding Famine-related changes in Irish society, we will not discuss the sociohistorical scholarship on the Irish family by such authors as Timothy W. Guinnane and David Fitzpatrick. Instead, our focus is on literary representations of the post-Famine Irish family and their implications for Irish cultural memory.

extent, emigration, family structures are compromised, necessitating their reconsideration. As Diarmaid Ferriter also remarks, the role of the family in Irish culture has not been the subject of ‘sustained examination.’¹⁶ This also holds true with regard to the Irish family in the light of the Famine, with the exception of a number of feminist studies focusing on the role of female and maternal figures in works representing the Great Hunger.¹⁷

This article will analyse the representation of the Irish family in four neglected works of Famine fiction by Irish authors published between 1871 and 1912. In ‘Ireland’s’ *Forlorn but not Forsaken* (1871), Hester Sigerson’s *A Ruined Race* (1889), Joseph Guinan’s *The Moores of Glynn* (1907) and ‘Slieve Foy’s’ ‘Attie and his Father’ (1912), the Irish family unit is profoundly upset by the Famine, requiring the narratives to find alternative iterations for the family structure. In particular, we will focus on the plight of Catholic families from the tenant and labourer classes, as these layers of society were most heavily affected by the Famine. The texts here discussed are representative of many other Famine texts from this era. In these narratives, the explicit focus on the family unit as a metonym for a larger social or cultural community corresponds to Neil J. Smelser’s observation that societal systems, including family institutions, are important gauges of cultural trauma, as their disruption due to ‘social dislocations and catastrophes’ informs the construction of cultural trauma and the concomitant recalibration of cultural identity.¹⁸

By extension, the literary representation of the family serves on a metalevel as a metonym for this social process, and as such becomes a textual metaphorical representation of the cultural trauma of the Famine. In its semiotic capacity to transcend the narrow limits of the family itself and carry significance as a figure of memory in Irish cultural memory, it

16 Ferriter, *Transformation of Ireland*, 4.

17 See for example Margaret Kelleher, *The Feminization of Famine: Expressions of the Inexpressible?* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), and Marguérite Corporaal, ‘Memories of the Great Famine and Ethnic Identity in Novels by Victorian Irish Women Writers’, *English Studies* 90/2 (2009), 142–56.

18 Neil J. Smelser, ‘Psychological Trauma and Cultural Trauma’, in Jeffrey C. Alexander et al., *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, 37.

becomes a self-referential sign or an example of what Pierre Nora calls *lieux de mémoire*, ‘material, symbolic and functional’ nodal points that are of great importance for the construction of cultural memory.¹⁹ As a repository of cultural memory, the family unit bears testimony to the forceful problematisation of the distinction between the private sphere on the one hand and the public sphere on the other.²⁰

‘Ireland’, *Forlorn but not Forsaken: A Story of (the Famine of 1848) the ‘Bad Times’ in Ireland* (1871)

Very little is known about the anonymous female writer who wrote under the pseudonym ‘Ireland’. She wrote two short narratives about the Great Famine: *A Tale of the Irish Famine in 1846 and 1847, Founded on Fact* (1847) and *Forlorn but not Forsaken* (1871). In *Forlorn but not Forsaken*, ‘Ireland’ concedes that hers is a narrative of fiction and that thus ‘the incidents’ are ‘related rather more consecutively than they occurred’. Nevertheless, the writer also argues for the veracity of her account and her status as direct witness, stating that ‘yet they are substantially true, and stereotyped in the memory of one who observed them.’²¹

‘Ireland’s’ *Forlorn but not Forsaken* focuses on Mrs Gwynne and her family. The Gwynnes are benevolent Protestant landowners who are themselves badly affected by the blight. In this narrative, no echelon of society can escape the grip of the Famine. Isabel Gwynne, while her own family

19 Pierre Nora, ‘Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*’. *Representations* 26 (1989), 23.

20 The invalidation of the rigid distinction between public and private spheres through the figure of the family is also acknowledged by Margot Gayle Backus in *The Gothic Family Romance: Heterosexuality, Child Sacrifice, and the Anglo-Irish Colonial Order* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 15.

21 ‘Ireland’, prologue to *Forlorn but not Forsaken: A Story of (the Famine of 1848) the ‘Bad Times’ in Ireland* (Dublin: George Herbert, 1871), n.p.

has to make do with scanty meals as well, toils daily as superintendent of the relief of 'supplies of meal and rice which had been granted for the sufferers by Quakers'²² to provide sustenance to 'the famishing crowds' at her doorstep.²³ Among these suffering wretches is Biddy Lynch, on whose family this discussion focuses. *Forlorn but not Forsaken*, focusing on the Protestant genteel Mrs Gwynne and her efforts to alleviate suffering during the Famine, is clearly written in line with the Protestant tradition that also informs *A Tale of the Irish Famine*. Yet the story also contains telling insights concerning the traditional Catholic (tenant) family, represented in the framework narrative about Biddy.

Biddy Lynch is a fourteen-year-old peasant farmer's daughter who is orphaned at the onset of this Famine narrative, an event which forces her to adopt both paternal and maternal roles to take care of her younger siblings, while simultaneously attempting to prevent their eviction. When she fails to avert their dispossession, her sister and brother are taken to the workhouse and Biddy is taken in as a servant in the Gwynne residence. There, the tide turns, as the threat of starvation no longer looms and Biddy is lovingly instructed in the teachings of Protestantism by the angelic Mrs Gwynne. Several years later, Biddy's aunt from America, Judy O'Donoghue, comes to Ireland to take the young woman with her, because as she argues 'in this country she has not the same chances of bettering herself as she will have in the *States*'.²⁴ With a sore heart, Biddy leaves for America. The narrative then – in a quite artificial and strained manner – fast-forwards several years, and Mrs Gwynne learns that Biddy's siblings were also sent for and that by now Biddy is married, comfortably living in 'Cumberland City, Mass.' and that she and her husband are 'well off [...] in business, and enjoying every happiness with a promising young plantation round about their table.'²⁵

22 'Ireland', *Forlorn but not Forsaken*, 17.

23 *Ibid.*, 16.

24 *Ibid.*, 44.

25 *Ibid.*, 46.

The narrative provides the Catholic tenant family with two possible outcomes: when failing to adapt to changing societal and natural circumstances, they very likely face death, as was the case for the Lynches and other tenant families which are flatly characterised as fast-perishing charity-seekers at the Gwynne residence's kitchen. In this manner, these Irish rural characters are depicted as arrested by the trauma of the Famine; unable to move on or to 'work through' the trauma,²⁶ they are, as it were, stuck on repeat and are placed in the margins not only of 'Ireland's' narrative, but of the ideology of progressive history. Survival is presented as possible if the subject is willing and able to transform him- or herself by way of religious conversion, disconnection from the (home)land through 'displacement'²⁷ and emigration, or both, which is exemplified by Bidy and her siblings.

On her path to survival and even good fortune, Bidy's transformations are represented as her attempts to adapt to new variations of the family unit. As both mother and father to her siblings Nelly and Johnny, Bidy tries to maintain their traditional family way of life, but fails. As a servant of the Protestant landlording Gwynne family, Bidy is fully accepted as a member of the family and finds happiness: the narrator even remarks that 'Bidy had the greatest love for Mrs Gwynne her best friend'²⁸ and stresses that the whole family is sad to see her leave. Then, after the voyage to America, she has to adapt yet again to the familial circumstances of her aunt's household in an urban setting. The narrative says nothing about this period in Bidy's life. However, the letter by the adult Bidy concluding the short story does demonstrate that Bidy and her siblings are doing very well for themselves and that Bidy continues to adhere to Mrs Gwynne's Protestant teachings.

26 For the concept of 'working through', see Dominick LaCapra, *History and Memory after Auschwitz* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998).

27 Angelika Bammer compares the circumstances of an oppressed people at home to the situation of a people in diaspora, pointing out that both are in a position of 'displacement'. 'Introduction', in Angelika Bammer, ed., *Displacements* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), xi.

28 'Ireland', *Forlorn but not Forsaken*, 38.

In contrast to much romantic didactic fiction²⁹ representing Irish Catholicism as the means to survival and spiritual welfare written by transatlantic Irish authors in the 1850s, 1860s and 1870s – exemplified by Mary Anne Sadlier’s entire oeuvre, Hugh Quigley’s *Profit and Loss* (1873), or James McElgun’s *Annie Reilly* (1873) – here it is the Protestant religion that has given young Bidy the tools for survival in the new world. Focusing on the individual in different familial configurations rather than on the coherent and static family unit, *Forlorn but not Forsaken* takes the Lynch family as representative of traditional Catholic peasant life, suggesting that only through great adaptability and the casting off of traditional ways of life and social patterns will the Irish individual be able to survive and thrive. ‘Ireland’ thus attempts to create what David Lloyd describes elsewhere as a ‘progressive narrative’ for Ireland after the Famine by assigning in this case a ‘hegemonic role’ to Anglo-Irish Protestantism in post-Famine transatlantic Irish culture and future, and does so by relegating ill-adapted elements – in this case, the rural Catholic lower classes and their way of life, represented by the Lynch family – to ‘the meaningless detritus of history’.³⁰

Hester Sigerson, *A Ruined Race; or, the Last MacManus of Drumroosk* (1889)

Hester Sigerson (née Varian) was born in Co. Cork in 1828 and belonged to a family of influential writers ‘devoted to literature and music, all thinkers and all thoroughly Irish in feeling’.³¹ A ‘woman of fine literary talent’,

29 For an elaborate discussion of romantic didactic fiction written by Irish-American authors, see Charles Fanning, *The Exiles of Erin: Nineteenth-Century Irish-American Fiction* (Chester Springs, PA: Dufour Editions, 1997) and *The Irish Voice in America: 250 Years of Irish-American Fiction* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2000).

30 David Lloyd, *Anomalous States: Irish Writing and the Post-Colonial Moment* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 10.

31 Charles Anderson Read and Katharine Tynan Hinkson, eds., *The Cabinet of Irish Literature*, vol. 4 (London: Blackie, 1903), 32.

Sigerson wrote poetry and short fiction and also contributed to various newspapers and journals such as *Cork Examiner*, *Young Ireland*, and *Irish Monthly*.³² Sigerson died in 1898 in Dublin.³³

Being not only ‘thoroughly Irish in feeling’, but also very concerned with the plight of the poor Irish peasantry, Sigerson dedicated her work to Mrs Gladstone, ‘in grateful recognition of her sympathy with the peasantry of Ireland’. Thus, the tone is set for this familial story written shortly after the Land Wars, but relating the 1840s Famine, which focuses on the small fictional town of Fortmanus. *A Ruined Race* tells the tale of the Macmanuses, a family of ‘the ould stock’,³⁴ and their gradual but speedy disintegration. Dan Macmanus, the novel’s male protagonist, is descended from an age-old line of noble Macmanuses, Catholic landholders who used to be the kind rulers of the Drumroosk region. Finding themselves in a fast-changing and radically different social and – as Sigerson presents it, immoral – order, Dan Macmanus’s ancestors lose their titles and property because they ‘would not be turncoats’³⁵ in a new heavily polarised order of society.

During the narrative, which spans about ten years, Dan marries Mary and they experience a few years of simple and pastoral bliss and even affluence. But then, times change as the Famine hits Ireland. First, Dan and Mary’s little girl Eily dies of starvation. After this, the hardships of the Famine are further exacerbated by the greed of an uninterested absentee landlord and the evil doings of the English agent Mr Butler and his recently converted middleman Billy Finnigan, who has ‘the starvation an’ death of many a one on [his] soul’.³⁶ Fueled by their greed and strong antipathy for the (Catholic) Irish peasantry, the agent and middleman are the final nails in the Macmanus coffin: they evict the by now destitute couple, after

32 Read and Hinkson, *Cabinet of Irish Literature*, 201; Tina O’Toole, *Dictionary of Munster Women Writers, 1800–2000* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2005), 277.

33 Anne Ulry Colman, *Dictionary of Nineteenth-Century Irish Women Poets* (Galway: Kenny’s Bookshop, 1996), 229. For a more elaborate biographical description of Sigerson, see Corporaal, Cusack, and Janssen, eds, *Recollecting Hunger*, 156–7.

34 Hester Sigerson, *A Ruined Race; or, The Last MacManus of Drumroosk* (London: Ward and Downey, 1889), 27.

35 *Ibid.*, 44.

36 *Ibid.*, 154.