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# Three Famine Books

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## By the Editor

**A Death-Dealing Famine: The Great Hunger in Ireland.** By Christine Kinealy (Pluto Press, London & Chicago, 1996, 192 pp). £12.99 sterling.

**The Culture of Commemoration: The Great Irish Famine – A Dangerous Memory?** By Christine Kinealy (Cultures of Ireland, 1996, 18 pp). No price stated.

The achievement of the Liverpool-Irish historian Dr. Christine Kinealy epitomises the largely unnoticed revolution in modern Irish historical research which has accompanied the avalanche of publications on the Famine. Previously Assistant Director of the Ulster Historical Foundation, whose record in academic publications has been overtaken by the Institute of Irish Studies in Queen's University since her transfer to the University of Liverpool (of which she is a Fellow), her massive study four years ago – **This Great Calamity** – looks like becoming the most important book to come out of the 150th anniversary commemorations of that traumatic event.<sup>1</sup>

One of the earliest publications of the sesquicentennial, it rocked the academic world and provided a brilliant example of post- or counter-revisionism that has set the tone for many of the later works of the past four years. Kinealy's main conclusions merit (inadequate?) synopsis. Had Westminster responded appropriately, the Famine was neither inevitable nor unavoidable. Britain refused to accept the logical consequences of the Union; thus its famine relief was derisory in both quantity and effect.

Worse (Kinealy argued), British policy comprised sinister social engineering – a dose of starvation that produced badly needed agricultural reform cheaply but callously. To balance this indictment, Kinealy also came to other (unpopular) conclusions – e.g. that to some extent Irish landlords were convenient scapegoats for the calamity of 1845-52, that Victoria does not deserve the bad press she has got for 150 years, and that Peel, so far from being a hero of the Famine, was instead merely an opportunistic politician on the make, for whom the event was fortuitous and exploitable.

Three years after her Irish book Dr. Kinealy produced another equally masterful account of the Famine, this time from a mainly American publishing house noted for its "left of centre" books. Superficially, the end result is the same; but there is a subtle difference. Whereas the Gill-Macmillan book is clearly aimed at an academic target, the Pluto book is more populist in its appeal. Bereft of tables (24 in Gill), maps (3 in Gill), photographs (8 pages in Gill) and appendices (3 in Gill), it runs to a mere 155 pages compared to Gill's 360 and contains only 22 pages of notes compared to Gill's 47. But because of its comparative brevity the message is hammered home more bluntly, so that John Mitchel and Michael Davitt, with their respective accusations of genocide and holocaust long ago, are (whether intentionally or not) restored to respectability.

However, by far the most remarkable feature of Dr. Kinealy's shorter book is its opening chapter – 15 pages of concentrated assault on revisionism that spares nobody. Edwards & William find themselves slotted into the same niche as Cruise O'Brien, Roy Foster, Mary Daly, Eoghan Harris, Kevin Myers and John Waters – some of them guilty (she argues) of pursuing an anti-nationalist agenda that for nearly half a century imposed a silence on famine research



and that more recently cited “anecdotal evidence for ... emotive arguments” to give “ideological concerns ... priority over informed historical debate”. The intellectual minefield Kinealy so explicitly describes here seems bound to ensure that research on, and controversy surrounding, this watershed in modern Irish history will long outlive the 150th anniversary.

Finally, also from Dr. Kinealy’s pen comes a comprehensive discussion of the Famine commemorations themselves, which reaches the not too surprising conclusion that for some the whole event is a dangerous memory. While many of the themes in her two major books are repeated here, she also makes some interesting new points. She castigates the Bruton-Spring administration for ending the official commemorations in 1997, as if the Famine was over by 1847, hinting that it had to give way to pro-Wexford bias among some (now ex-) Ministers.

She points out that the impact of the blight on Ulster has been ignored. She gives deserved praise to de Valera for commissioning the Edwards-Williams book, even though it fell far below his expectations. However, the cross-Border group responsible for this booklet have not been well served by proof-reader or typesetter. There is a glaring error in the second line of the opening page and minor printing defects elsewhere – p. 11 (par. 3), p. 13 (par. 2), p. 14 (line 1) and p. 15 (lines 2 and 3).

*Marcus Bourke*

#### FOOTNOTE

1. The Great Calamity: The Irish Famine 1845-52. By Christine Kinealy (Gill & Macmillan, Dublin, 1994, 450 pp). £17.99 paperback.

