

## **Oral History, Oral Tradition and the Great Famine.**

A chapter attempting a discussion of oral history and tradition as a source for the study of the Irish famine must surely start with a story. This story was told to me by my mother about her own maternal grandmother, Mary Skehan, the wife of a comfortable farmer in the upland region of north Waterford. In a tradition passed down to her daughter and her granddaughters, was a woman of great generosity. During the famine, so my mother told me, Mary Skehan was never known to turn a poor person away from her door and yet, despite her constant giving, her meal-bin was never empty.<sup>1</sup> She died when my mother was a child – almost a century ago – yet the story lives on, transmitted by me to my children and to anyone else who cares to listen. So here we have an authentic piece of oral history about the great famine. Or do we? Is this story oral history? And is it about the famine?

### ***Oral history and oral tradition***

This piece of family lore, its theme of generosity rewarded familiar in all folklores, illustrates many of the complexities of the oral as a source for historical research. In the first place, it raises questions regarding the distinction between oral history – the first-hand evidence of individuals – and oral tradition – tales passed on from one generation to the next<sup>2</sup> But oral tradition may begin as oral history, mutating gradually from first hand narration to stories that open with ‘people used to say that...’ Mary Skehan’s story probably originated in the late 1800s in the personal testimony of a neighbour, cousin or passing ‘knight of the road, then metamorphosed into a semi-miraculous tale in family folklore, transmitted onward from the Skehans’ upland locality to the home of Mary’s daughter and grandchildren, eight miles to the south, to spread subsequently through space and time to admiring, mildly amused or even bored audiences.

The story has a second significance in the context of the present volume. It suggests how the oral does not remain oral forever: through its present committal to print, Mary Skehan’s

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Murphy, née Hickey, regarding her grandmother, Mary Skehan of Kilbrack, Rathgormac, County Waterford. This story was told on many occasions between the mid 1950s and 2000.

<sup>2</sup> For a comprehensive and sympathetic discussion of this folk theme, see Cormac Ó Gráda, *Black '47 and beyond: the great Irish famine in history, economy, and memory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999) pp 213-215.

story enters that ante-room between orality and text, ensured survival but shorn of the vibrancy of the spoken word and of its 'layers of meaning and directions of interpretation.'<sup>3</sup> In this it resembles other famine stories, originally orally transmitted but now buried in nineteenth memoirs and politically inspired newspaper articles, or included in the Irish Folklore Commission collections of the 1930s onwards.<sup>4</sup> This archive, which includes responses to a questionnaire circulated on the occasion of the famine centenary in 1945, represents the formalisation of private collection efforts carried on sporadically over the previous decades.<sup>5</sup> The idea of state-backed collection of folklore was spurred by both the requirements of nation-building in the immediate post-independence period and the need to preserve memories in danger of obliteration by ongoing social, economic and linguistic change.

Such a realisation was not new: sixty years previously Canon John O'Rourke decided that 'the leading facts' of the Irish famine should be compiled and published without delay, since 'that testimony of the most valuable kind, namely contemporary testimony, was silently but rapidly passing away with the generation that had witnessed the scourge.'<sup>6</sup> Although a number of fictional works based on the famine period had been published from the 1860s onwards, there was no attempt at a detailed account of the disaster until O'Rourke's book appeared.<sup>7</sup> His work was a model of painstaking research in the documentary record of the 1840s but was also informed by his own (sketchily outlined) memories and by other personal testimonies of the famine. O'Rourke, in fact, seems to have been the first to give serious consideration in a largely non-polemical context, to the still living memory of the calamity,

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<sup>3</sup> Alessandro Portelli, 'A dialogical relationship. An approach to oral history,

[http://www.swaraj.org/shikshantar/expressions\\_portelli.pdf](http://www.swaraj.org/shikshantar/expressions_portelli.pdf), accessed 26 August 2010.

<sup>4</sup> Diarmuid O'Donovan Rossa, *Rossa's Recollections 1838-1898*, (First edition New York, 1898; Shannon, Irish University Press, 1972); *Irish World and American Industrial Liberator* (New York), 16 April, 28 May 1898; *Nation*, 26 September 1872.

<sup>5</sup> The Irish Folklore Commission was established in 1935 and was succeeded in 1972 by the Department of Irish Folklore at UCD, where the archive is presently located. <http://www.ucd.ie/folklore/en/>

<sup>6</sup> Canon John O'Rourke, *The great Irish famine* (Veritas: Dublin, 1989) (originally Dublin: James Duffy, 1875), p. xv.

<sup>7</sup> William Carlton, *The black prophet: a tale of Irish famine* (Belfast and London: Simms and McIntyre, 1847); *The farmer of Inniscreen: a tale of the Irish famine in verse*, (London....1863); Elizabeth H. Walshe, *Golden hills: a gale of the Irish famine* (London: Religious Tract Society, 1865); *Forlorn, but not forsaken: a story of the 'Hard Times' in Ireland*, (Dublin: no publisher, 1871).

much as Brother Luke Cullen had done forty years previously in relation to memories of the 1798 rebellion in Wicklow.<sup>8</sup>

### ***Historians and oral history***

For over a century after the publication of O'Rourke's work, however, Irish historians proved wary of the oral as a historical source, so much so that Beiner, during his several years in the Irish Folklore archive at University College Dublin researching the 1798 Connaught rebellion, met no other historians similarly engaged.<sup>9</sup> Nor is there much reference to popular memory in the many recent academic works on the famine, which largely rely (as, indeed, did O'Rourke) on the 'firmly constructed, reliable and permanent' documentary sources from the famine period itself.<sup>10</sup> In her 1997 analysis of historical research on the famine, Mary Daly rightly cast doubt on the capacity of oral tradition to greatly improve our understanding of the events of the 1840s, echoing the objection noted by Portelli that 'memory and subjectivity tend to "distort" the facts'.<sup>11</sup> However, recent work by Ó Gráda, Ó Cíosáin, Poirtéir and Beiner give a more nuanced view of the role of oral tradition in historical research, and the present chapter is to a great extent a synthesis of their work, shot through with some reflection on the insights offered by family tradition.<sup>12</sup>

While the contemporary record – private and public correspondence, local newspapers, and the records of the poor law – allow us to witness the events of the famine unfolding, the evidence available in the oral tradition is marred by the time lag between event and narration. As Ó Gráda suggests, songs may be the exception to this rule of dilution by time, their wording largely unchanged from one generation to the next and their themes resonant

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<sup>8</sup> Myles Ronan (ed.), *'98 in Wicklow: the story as written by Rev. Bro. Luke Cullen ODC (1793-1859)*, (Wexford: People Newspaper Office, 1938).

<sup>9</sup> Beiner, *Remembering the Year of the French*, p. xi.

<sup>10</sup> Patrick Hickey, 'Famine, mortality and emigration: a profile of six parishes in the poor law union of Skibbereen 1846-7' in Patrick O'Flanagan and Cornelius Buttimer (eds.), *Cork: history and society*, (Dublin, 1993), pp 873-918; Christine Kinealy, 'The response of the Poor Law to the great famine' in Gerard Moran, Raymond Gillespie and William Nolan (eds.), *Galway: history and society*, (Dublin, 1996), pp 375-393; Paul Thompson, 'Believe it or not: rethinking the historical interpretation of memory', <http://epa-web.soe.ucy.ac.cy/courses/EPA731/Believe>, p. 2, accessed 6 November 2009..

<sup>11</sup> Mary E. Daly, 'Historians and the famine: a beleaguered species?' in *Irish Historical Studies*, Vol. 30, No. 120 (Nov. 1997), pp. 591-601; Portelli, 'A dialogical relationship', p. 4.

<sup>12</sup> Ó Gráda, *Black '47 and beyond*; Niall Ó Cíosáin, 'Approaching a folklore archive: the Irish Folklore Commission and the memory of the great famine', Folklore.FindArticles.com, [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_2115/ai\\_n8693730/](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_2115/ai_n8693730/), accessed 5 November 2009; Cathal Poirtéir, *Famine echoes*, (Dublin, Gill and Macmillan, 1995).

of a time now gone – ‘fossilized like contemporary written documents, without subsequent filtering.’<sup>13</sup> But the narrated memories are more problematic. Though those recounted by O’Rourke in 1874 and Rossa in 1898, along with the random references appearing in the late nineteenth century press, were certainly first-hand accounts of the events of the 1840s, their recording forty years after the famine may well have dulled their detail and accuracy. The time lag is even more serious in the case of the stories (like that of Mary Skehan) in popular currency in the 1920s and collected by the Irish Folklore Commission from 1935 onwards, separated as they were from their origins by several decades and up to four generations. Most of the respondents to the famine questionnaire of 1945 were born a quarter century after the famine, and this time gap is reflected time and again in the narratives: ‘Old people here say they heard from their fathers’, ‘Long years ago I heard an old man say....’; ‘In my young days I used to hear old people discuss...’<sup>14</sup>

This distance between event and narration has inevitably led to the obliteration of memories, a phenomenon not unique to the Irish experience – in Ethiopia memories of poems composed during the famine of the mid-1980s had faded only a decade after the event.<sup>15</sup> But such ‘porosity of memory’ may be due as much to people’s *unwillingness* to remember as to their inability. Had Mary Skehan’s family – farmers of forty-acre holdings of good land in the early 1850s – done well out of post-famine consolidation, and does this explain why no other famine-related narratives surfaced in the family lore?<sup>16</sup> On the other side of the Comeragh mountains, my father’s maternal aunts and uncles parried any questions about the events of the 1840s through which their parents had lived – though whether this was due ‘self-protectiveness’ in relation to their own experiences, or to an understandable reluctance to call up distressing memories in the presence of young people, is not now clear.<sup>17</sup> The Irish Folklore collection narratives display a similar circumspection regarding famine-related topics, ‘distancing...the informant’s source, usually an immediate

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<sup>13</sup> Ó Gráda, *Black '47*, p. 217.

<sup>14</sup> Ó Gráda, *Black '47 and beyond*, p. 199; Irish Folklore Commission, 1072:185-230. William O’Dowd, born 1863, County Leitrim; Poirtéir, *Famine Echoes*, pp 49, 217, citing Sean Rowley, Rossport, Co. Mayo and Ned Buckley, Knocknagree, Co. Cork.

<sup>15</sup> Cormac Ó Gráda, *Famine: a short history* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), p. 39.

<sup>16</sup> *Griffith’s Valuation*, County Waterford, Parish of Mothel, townlands of Kilbrack and Graigavalla.

<sup>17</sup> In conversation c. 1975 with Thomas Murphy (born 1896). His grandmother, Mary Cooney, was born in 1826, so must have had quite clear memories of the famine. Her sons and daughters were born between 1858 and 1877. Census of Ireland 1901, County Waterford, Townland of Toureen East, District Electoral Division of Knockaunbrandaun; Thompson, ‘Believe it or not’, p. 7.

ancestor, from the starving people.’<sup>18</sup> This ‘othering’ of the famine experience took a number of forms. Firstly, as Poirteir and Ó Cíosáin have shown, the worst effects of the famine were almost always described as having been felt in other areas, and this despite the census evidence of sharp population decline in the home districts of the narrators. Neither, despite the considerable attention given in the narratives to workhouses and soup kitchens, was there any reference to informants’ family members having recourse to these sources of relief or, indeed, of stealing food to evade starvation.<sup>19</sup>

Another type of distance, too, colours the oral evidence, i.e. the social distance between the narrator and those who form the subjects of the narrative. Purportedly coming ‘from below’, oral tradition is in some ways as much a view ‘from above’ as is contemporary elite testimony from coroners, clergymen, landlords, philanthropists and officials. This is true of the first-hand narratives of the late nineteenth century: when O’Donovan Rossa wrote his memoirs he was prominent in advanced nationalist circles in Irish-America; O’Rourke was on the staff of the Catholic seminary in Maynooth, while most of those whose testimony he recorded were also priests or doctors.<sup>20</sup> The same perspective from ‘above’, ‘outside’ and *post hoc*, applies in different ways to the family and local oral traditions collected since the later nineteenth century. Ó Cíosáin estimated that the Irish Folklore Commission’s informants were largely drawn from the ranks of the small farmers – those whose forebears had survived the famine – their narratives reflecting the value system of their class.<sup>21</sup> That ‘remembering and retelling are indeed influenced by the social frameworks of memory’, as Portelli expressed it, is also clear in the story of Mary Skehan, recounted as it was in a family of solid farmers.<sup>22</sup> Their retelling of her story, while no doubt accurately celebrating her charity (replicated in two subsequent generations of strong-minded and open-handed women), also firmly confirmed her and their position in the ranks of the ‘respectable’ farming class – givers of charity and with a longstanding stake in the area. It is no accident, surely, that the story took shape in the hey-day of what Hoppen termed ‘agricola victor’ –

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<sup>18</sup> Carmel Quinlan, ‘“A punishment from God”: the famine in the centenary folklore questionnaire’, *Irish Review*, 19, 1996, pp 68-80; Ó Gráda, *Black ’47 and beyond*, pp. 212-13.

<sup>19</sup> Ó Gráda, *Black ’47 and beyond*, pp. 206-208; Ó Cíosáin, ‘Approaching a folklore archive’.

<sup>20</sup> R. V. Comerford, ‘Canon John O’Rourke, historian of the great famine’ in T. Kabedebo (ed.), *Beyond the library walls: John Paull II annual lectures* (Maynooth: St Patrick’s College, 1995), pp 8-22.

<sup>21</sup> Ó Cíosáin, ‘Approaching a folklore archive’; Ó Gráda, *Black ’47 and beyond*, p. 212.

<sup>22</sup> Portelli, ‘Dialogical relationship’, p. 5.

i.e. when farmers, on the cusp of changing from tenants to proprietors, came to be looked on as the backbone of Irish society.<sup>23</sup>

On the other hand, it would be misleading to over-emphasise these different types of distance between narrator on the one hand and subject and event on the other. O'Rourke recorded not only the memories of priests and doctors but also of more humble individuals like the old man who, in the mid-1850s, described the virtual disappearance of the village of Bridgetown outside Skibbereen in the famine years. Moreover, the doctor and priests he spoke to were not merely detached *observers* of famine: their activities in the later 1840s put them in immediate danger of contracting famine fever, while some experienced at first hand the pangs of hunger.<sup>24</sup> As for Rossa, his own family had felt the effects of the crop failure of the 1840s and the ensuing hunger – though not to the point of starvation – and those memories were very clear in his mind fifty years later. Nor, indeed, does he appear to have exaggerated his own personal experience of the disaster:

Some years ago, in Troy, New York, I was a guest at the hotel of Tom Curley of Ballinasloe. Talking of “the bad times” in Ireland, he told me of his own recollection of them in Galway, and asked me if I ever felt the hunger. I told him I did not, but that I felt something that was worse than the hunger... the degradation into which want and hunger will reduce human nature.<sup>25</sup>

Though Rossa's guilt concerned no more than how he had eaten a penny bun without sharing with his siblings, it does link issue central to oral testimony and tradition – i.e. the parallel existence of three different and sometimes competing narratives identified by Ó Cíosáin as the 'global', the 'popular' and the 'local'.<sup>26</sup> The global he defines as largely national in scope (what might be termed the 'grand narrative') and frequently derived or influenced by written sources. The local, at the far end of the scale, concerns fragmentary memories of events, places and individuals. The third level, the popular, focuses largely on a

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<sup>23</sup> K. T. Hoppen, *Ireland since 1800: Conflict and conformity* (London: Longman, 1998, p. 89. The family's position as comfortable farmers can be traced back to the early 1850s when, both maternal and paternal forebears held farms ranging from 40 to 50 acres (ranging from £36 to £43 valuation) as tenants of Walter Mansfield and the Marquis of Waterford. *Griffith's Valuation*, County Waterford, Parish of Mothel, townlands of Kilbrack and Graigavalla.

<sup>24</sup> O'Rourke, *Great Irish famine*, pp 157, 211; Donal Kerr, *A nation of beggars? Priests, people and politics in famine Ireland 1846-1852*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), pp 43, 171.

<sup>25</sup> O'Donovan Rossa, *Recollections*, p. 122.

<sup>26</sup> Ó Cíosáin, 'Approaching a famine archive'.

'stylised repertoire' of motifs and narratives that seek to illustrate or attach meaning to the unexplainable. Rossa's anecdote reflects all three levels: its focus is local and personal; the theme of abandonment of kin (even in the small matter of failing to share a bun) serves as a motif of how disaster upsets normal human relationships; and the chapter in which the anecdote appears, 'How England Starved Ireland', belongs to the grand narrative of anglophobic Irish nationalism.

### ***The grand narrative***

The backdrop of a grand narrative reminds us, as researchers, that what appears to be purely oral tradition is also shaped by the documentary record.<sup>27</sup> As the twentieth century dawned, memoirs, school histories, poems and popular fiction became ever more accessible to an increasingly literate population.<sup>28</sup> Some of these injected an anti-English element into famine narratives, particularly in the 1880s and 1890s when near-famine conditions prevailed in the west and the nationalist press deliberately called up phantoms of the 1840s, warning that 'the demon of English famine again broods over enslaved, impoverished and unhappy Ireland' while the inclusion of famine memories in Rossa's 1898 *Recollections* had an equally polemical purpose.<sup>29</sup> But even more powerful in popularising an Anglophobic interpretation of the famine was John Mitchel's *Jail Journal*, in print since 1854.<sup>30</sup> The powerful, elegant and lucid writing style ensured that this work, with its underlying political message, was in the 1920s passed on to bright pupils by their teachers as an example of 'good English'.<sup>31</sup> Mary Skehan's granddaughter, a conduit of the generosity story, was given the *Jail Journal* in her local convent school by one of the teaching sisters (herself a

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<sup>27</sup> Mary Daly, 'Historians and the famine: a beleaguered species?', *Irish Historical Studies*, xxx, no. 120 (November 1997), p. 599.

<sup>28</sup> From the 1880s onwards famine-related works (fictional and historical) included Charles E. Trevelyan, *The Irish crisis: being a narrative of the measures for the relief of the distress caused by the great Irish famine of 1846-7*, (London: Macmillan, 1880); William Patrick O'Brien, *The great famine in Ireland and a retrospect of the fifty years 1845-95, with a sketch of the present condition and future prospects* (London: Downey, 1896); Edward Newenham Hoare, *Mike: a tale of the great Irish famine*, (London: Christian Knowledge Society, 1898); Vaughan Nash, *The great famine and its causes* (London: Longman, 1900).

<sup>29</sup> *Irish World and Industrial Liberator* (New York), 28 May 1898; *Nation*, 22 July 1887, 6 March 1897.

<sup>30</sup> John Mitchel, *Jail journal: or five years in British prisons*, (New York: Citizen Office, 1854).

<sup>31</sup> Memory of Mary Murphy (b. 1912) regarding the Mercy Convent School in Portlaw, Co. Waterford.

contributor to the Irish Folklore Commission collection) whose cultural and religious influence remained with her for decades.<sup>32</sup>

Thus, by the 1920s when Mary Skehan's story was passed on to her granddaughter's generation, still more so by the time the Irish Folklore Commission began its work in the 1930s, there was already a well-established and widely disseminated corpus of written work on the famine, at least some of which combined with and coloured local and family memories of the event. This cross-fertilisation of oral tradition by written sources is clearly evident in some contributions to the folklore collection. While still centring on the local, such famine narratives cite detailed and specific information in relation to the famine, information directly echoing the published record:

The enormous amount of work in relieving the distress that ensued proved altogether beyond the scope of the Board of Guardians. Relief works were started and charitable organisations came to relief of the dying people but finally the Government had to give the Guardians authority to assist people outside the workhouses and outdoor relief was given in 1848 for the first time.<sup>33</sup>

Consider how different this last contribution is to the following which, while consistent with the grand narrative (emphasising the damage done by half-cooked food), departs from the common terminology (e.g. 'soup kitchen' becomes 'soup house') in a way that suggests the surviving memory of a local reality:

The soup house was where Mrs [David] Fitzgerald is now. They had a big boiler and they used to put about a sack of meal into it, and two strong old men stirring that with two sticks. Sometimes that [porridge] wouldn't be half boiled, and it would give them colics and kill them. They used to take it away in wooden cans on their heads, very thin. Those that were in charge of it would take home whatever remained.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> In conversation with Mary Murphy c. 1980.

<sup>33</sup> Poirteir, *Famine echoes*, p. 139, quoting Tomás Aichir, born 1859, of Kilmaley, Ennis, Co. Clare.

<sup>34</sup> Poirteir, *Famine echoes*, p. 143, quoting Pádraig Mhichíl Uí Shúilleabháin, b. 1867, Meall and Róistigh, Sneem, Co. Kerry.



To some extent, this ‘contamination’ of the ‘local’ by the ‘global’, of oral tradition by the grand narrative, resulted from the way the Irish Folklore Commission’s questions had been framed. This was not a matter of imposing a Mitchel-type interpretation on famine memories (and, incidentally, the Mary Skehan story was devoid of Anglophobia), a temptation that was admirably resisted by the Commission – no mean feat in the 1930s when the requirements of nation-building could have swamped those of academic enquiry. Indeed, the questionnaire used by the Folklore Commission collectors was devised by historians so as to counteract nationalist presuppositions about the famine.<sup>35</sup> But this in itself subjected the narrated memories to a different type of prior mediation, the questions reflecting the priorities of academic historians accustomed to documentary evidence rather than opening the doors to what was really ‘remembered’ at local level.<sup>36</sup> In the case of the famine memory collection, therefore, there was a tendency, if not to pre-shape the informants’ answers, then to shape the way in which they searched their memories.

### ***Memory and motif***

When informants to the Folklore Commission deviated from the precise themes of the questions posed, however, the most formulaic narratives could be shot through with arresting images – the memories of people’s mouths stained green from eating weeds, living children on their dead mothers’ breasts, snow-sprinkled bodies lying in ditches, dogs eating the unburied dead.<sup>37</sup> Such images can be interpreted on two levels. Firstly, as Ó Cíosáin shows, they serve as motifs to represent the reversal of the natural order in a period of chaos, just as Rossa’s memory of and remorse for secretly eating the penny bun stuck in his mind for half a century.<sup>38</sup> But their role as motifs should not detract from their essentially accurate representation of physical realities, all of which appear in the contemporary record,

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<sup>35</sup> Ó Cíosáin, ‘Approaching a folklore archive’; Canon O’Rourke also circulated a questionnaire to his respondents, but there is no evidence as to what questions it included. O’Rourke, *Great Irish famine*, p. xv.

<sup>36</sup> Carmel Quinlan, ‘Punishment from God’, p. 85. The Commission’s questions identified the main famine-related issues as the first appearance of blight, the spread of cholera, the establishment of fever hospitals, the running of the workhouses and relief schemes, emigration, evictions, the attitude of ‘well-to-do families and priests’, the experience of proselytism.

<sup>37</sup> Roger J. McHugh, ‘The famine in Irish oral tradition’ in R. Dudley Edwards and T. Desmond Williams, *The great famine: studies in Irish history 1845-52* (Dublin: Browne and Nolan, 1956), pp 419-422; Poirtéir, *Famine echoes*, pp 85-115.

<sup>38</sup> Ó Cíosáin, ‘Approaching a folklore archive’.

and are replicated time and again in more recent famines.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, bringing together the local and popular levels of narration described by Ó Cíosáin, they were remembered not only because they represented in a universally understood way the enormity of the calamity, but because they were burned into people's minds by their highly emotional impact and by their frequent association with the local and familiar. One Kerry contribution to the Irish Folklore collection, understated rather than otherwise, illustrates this fusion of the visual, the emotional, the real and the symbolic:

... There were seven or eight of them there. A neat little family, white heads. My uncle Mick used to cry when he used be telling the story... Five of them died... Years after, my father was ditching near the ruin [of their house] and he found the bones. An old man and a child, the arm of the old man was wound around the child.<sup>40</sup>

The perpetuation of memory and the mapping of events through a combination of the local and popular levels of narrative is also clear in the way that places and events are closely linked. Rossa, for example, remembered into his old age the spot on the road where he and his family parted in 1848 as they left for America and he returned to Skibbereen.<sup>41</sup> Many of the accounts collected by the Folklore Commission, too, pinpointed clearly the location of a soup distribution centre, or of townlands emptied of their population by the famine. Sometimes a physical relic remained to confirm past events in local memory – the shards of a soup boiler, the ruins of a deserted clachan, or the clear traces of roads leading from nowhere to nowhere, the remnants of a road-building relief work. The memories of famine – just like those of the 1798 rebellion examined by Beiner – were then further preserved in place names, sometimes euphemistic like 'the Green Road', sometimes self-explanatory like Bóithrín na Déirce (the alms road), 'Famine Road' or Reilg a' tSlé (the Famine Graveyard).<sup>42</sup> But there was also a more conscious interlinking of local memory and commemoration when religious devotionism literally reshaped the physical form of objects directly connected

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<sup>39</sup> Karol Ssemogerere, 'Famine in Uganda: lessons from Uganda's oral history', *Monitor Uganda*, 23 September 2009, <http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/rwb.nsf/db900SID/MUMA-7U84TXZ>

<sup>40</sup> Poirtéir, *Famine echoes*, p. 93, citing Eibhlín Bean Phádraig Uí Shúilleabháin, Sneem Co. Kerry.

<sup>41</sup> O'Donovan Rossa, *Recollections*, p. 142.

<sup>42</sup> Beiner, *Remembering the year of the French*, p. 214; Patrick Hickey, 'Famine, mortality and emigration: a profile of six parishes in the poor law union of Skibbereen 1846-7', in Patrick O'Flanagan and Cornelius Buttimer, *Cork: history and society* (Dublin: Geography Publications, 1993), p. 888; Poirtéir, *Famine echoes*, pp 132-165.

with the famine experience. Such was the case of 'TW', one of O'Rourke's informants who, in his Bantry boyhood, had seen the hinge-bottomed coffin repeatedly used for carrying the famine dead to the grave – a memory frequent in the Irish Folklore collection of fifty years later. 'TW' procured such a hinged coffin and had it made into three large crosses, one of which he gave to O'Rourke, so as to link death with the Christian hope of resurrection and to preserve the memory of those who had died.<sup>43</sup>

### ***Telescoping and blaming***

As Glassie stressed, oral tradition 'is unsteady about dates and loose in its handling of causative sequence'.<sup>44</sup> Personal testimony and oral history are notoriously careless with orthodox chronology. Their ensuing telescoping of time – memories or narratives of one period being merged with those of another – is typical of oral testimonies regarding the famine.<sup>45</sup> Such telescoping characterises the story of Mary Skehan, reminding us that precision and looseness can co-exist in the same orally transmitted narrative. At one level, she was a real person, identifiable in the census of 1901 and 1911, a formidable little woman dimly remembered by her older grandchildren as well as in the folklore of her own family.<sup>46</sup> At another level, she was a casualty of the oral tradition's telescoping of time: born in 1843, she was only a small child during the famine, so her career of generous giving belongs not in the 1840s but in the later decades of the nineteenth century. Or, perhaps the stories had inadvertently leap-frogged a generation, originally relating to Mary's mother who did live through the famine of the 1840s. Or was the story's reference to the famine simply a hook upon which to hang a moral lesson about charity, a lesson reflecting the home and school influences that shaped the outlook of those passing on the story?

How does oral tradition throw light on the issues of 'responsibility, culpability and blame' which obsessed nationalist polemicists like Mitchel and Rossa, and had come to colour the

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<sup>43</sup> O'Rourke, *Great Irish famine*, pp 213, 289 (footnote 28); Poirtéir, *Famine echoes*, pp 182-196.

<sup>44</sup> Henry Glassie, 'Folklore and History', address to the 1986 Minnesota Historical Society annual conference. <http://collections.mnhs.org/MNHHistoryMagazine/articles/50/v50i05p188=192.pdf>, accessed 6 November 2009.

<sup>45</sup> Ó Gráda, *Black '47 and beyond*, pp. 195-196.

<sup>46</sup> Census of Ireland, 1901 and 1911, County Waterford, District Electoral Division of Rathgormac, townland of Kilbrack.

popular view of history by the early twentieth century?<sup>47</sup> Many narratives collected by the Irish Folklore Commission apportioned blame ('Our local landlord always turned those seeking aid or food from his door...') – sometimes to the detriment of historical accuracy, as in the case of the Offaly landlord, Richard Gamble, whose efforts to alleviate suffering during the famine were given scant credit in the retrospective popular version of events.<sup>48</sup> Not all those blamed were landlords, nor was the allotting of blame confined to the rural context. When, in the early twentieth century, a young lad in Cork city asked about the Honan family commemorated in the local Catholic church they had funded, his rural-born mother lost no time in denouncing them as having made their money exporting corn during the famine.<sup>49</sup> Whether this country woman, born three decades after the famine and far from Cork city, was adopting the city's folklore or transposing rural oral tradition into an urban setting is impossible to say, largely because the Irish Folklore Commission did not collect material in the cities. The anecdote does, however, echo the combined resentment and begrudgery (sometimes open, sometime oblique) that characterised many folklore references to 'grabbing' farmers, shopkeepers and those who benefitted from the famine-related misfortunes of others.<sup>50</sup>

Yet even where the oral tradition pointed an accusing finger at individuals, especially landlords, it was more in their role as local villains rather than as representatives of a class. Even Rossa, who denounced landlords collectively as 'the English in Ireland', proved more benign when recalling the local reality:

The landlord of Renascreena in my day was Thomas Hungerford, or Cahirmore... a quiet kind of a man... God be good to him; he was not, that I know of, one of those evicting landlords that took pleasure in the extermination of the people.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Christine Kenealy, *A death-dealing famine: the great hunger in Ireland* (London, Pluto Press, 1997), p. 6. By the 1930s, the term 'Black 47' had become something of a short-hand term for the famine in the Irish local press: *Leitrim Observer*, 1 April 1934, *Munster Express*, 9 February 1940, 19 June 1946.

<sup>48</sup> T. P. O'Neill, 'The famine and Offaly' in William Nolan and T. P. O'Neill (eds.), *Offaly: history and society* (Dublin: Geography Publications, 1998), p. 691; Poirtéir, *Famine echoes*, p. 200, citing Séamus Reardon, Boulteen, Eniskeane, Co. Cork.

<sup>49</sup> In conversation with Thomas Murphy, born 1896, c. 1965; Robert Honan was listed as a merchant at Patrick's Quay, Cork, in *Slater's Directory for Ireland* (Manchester: Slater, 1846).

<sup>50</sup> Roger McHugh, 'The famine in Irish oral tradition', in R. Dudley Edwards and T. Desmond Williams (eds.), *The great famine: studies in Irish history 1845-52* (Dublin: Browne and Nolan, 1956), pp 429-30.

<sup>51</sup> O'Donovan Rossa, *Recollections*, pp. 15-16.

Almost half a century later, one highly articulate Mayo informant highlighted for the Irish Folklore Commission this gap between the negative popular view of landlords on the one hand, and what remained in the local oral tradition on the other:

It seems somewhat unorthodox to record written encomiums on Irish landlords as a rule, yet it has been conceded on all sides that Samuel Bournes was a generous and a charitable man. Whatever his motives, he was indeed a philanthropist.<sup>52</sup>

Thus, the oral tradition proved remarkably immune to polemical contamination, and generally avoided blaming any one agency for the tragedy of the 1840s. Instead, the popular narrative (Ó Cíosáin's third narrative level) sought supernatural or moral explanations for the disaster – a 'visitation of God', a just punishment for the people's wastefulness or laziness in the past.<sup>53</sup> As one west Cork narrative put it: 'Old people said it was God's will to have the famine come, for people abused fine food when they had it plenty. I heard it for a fact that spuds were so plentiful that they were put on the fields for manure'.<sup>54</sup> How long such narratives continued to circulate in the wider community is unclear, but they certainly impinged on my own childhood in the 1950s when my mother, Mary Skehan's granddaughter (who included no anti-English or anti-landlord strand in her narrative) greeted wastage of food with the warning that it was such waste that 'caused the famine'.<sup>55</sup>

## ***Conclusion***

So what light is cast on the great famine by oral history and tradition? The limitations of the oral as a historical source are clear: it can be 'contaminated' by documentary sources and by popular misconceptions of the past; it tends to telescope events from different periods and to read the past through the eyes of the present; and it can 'forget' as much as it 'remembers'. This brings us back to where we started, to Mary Skehan's story. Is the story oral history? Not really: it may have begun as such, but well over a century after its first narration it has entered the realms of oral tradition – not the clear-cut account of 'what happened' but a complex mixture of fact, image, allegory, wishful thinking and a family's self-projection. And does it relate to the great famine? Hardly, since its central figure lived

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<sup>52</sup> Poirtéir, *Famine echoes*, pp 206-207, quoting Michael Corduff, Rossport, Ballina, Co. Mayo.

<sup>53</sup> Niall Ó Cíosáin, 'Approaching a folklore archive'.

<sup>54</sup> Poirtéir, *Famine echoes*, p. 40, quoting Bill Powell, Enniskeane, Co. Cork.

<sup>55</sup> Memory of the author in relation to her mother, Mary Murphy (née Hickey) c. 1960.

after that event and her generosity – probably the only *real* part of the story – was exercised in the later part of the nineteenth century. But like the oral record generally, the story should not be dismissed. Even if it smacks of home-grown hagiography, of an idealisation of family and past, it is in Vansina’s words ‘the representation of the past in the present... reflecting both past and present in a single breath’.<sup>56</sup> The story may tell us relatively little about the famine of the 1840s, but it does tell us something both about how individuals and communities *wish* to remember and how values in the present can shape and be shaped by the past. It also raises questions as to how social status, gendered authority roles, and significant individuals (mothers, fathers, grandparents, teachers) determine the selection and transmission of memory.

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<sup>56</sup> Jan Vansina, *Oral tradition as history* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985, p. xii.