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Diaspora

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Representing the Great Irish Famine in America: Quinnipiac University's *An Gorta Mór* Collection and the Politics of Irish Identity in the American Diaspora

David A. Valone

In 1997 John L. Lahey, the president of Quinnipiac College—a relatively small, private college in central Connecticut—served as the Grand Marshall of the New York City Saint Patrick's Day parade. Lahey's selection as Grand Marshall gained considerable notoriety for two reasons: he was at the time the first Connecticut resident to serve as Grand Marshall of the New York City parade; more significantly, his status as the leader of an educational institution positioned him to participate in the heated political, educational and historical controversies concerning the commemoration and interpretation of the Great Irish Famine that were then unfolding in New York and across the northeastern United States. Lahey spent the year that he served as Grand Marshall moving to the forefront of this conversation as it grew in scope and intensity. His efforts fit within a larger movement among elements of the Irish diaspora to transform awareness about and representations of the nineteenth-century famine in American consciousness and in the educational curricula of secondary schools. Indeed, Lahey himself was reported as saying 'it was no accident that the parade committee chose an educator to be Grand Marshall on the 150th anniversary of the famine.'¹ These debates, in themselves, are historically significant because they raised a series of important questions about the politics of historical memory and representation.

Equally important, however, were the ongoing efforts undertaken by Lahey and his academic institution, subsequently rechristened as Quinnipiac

¹ Peggy McCarthy, 'A New York Irishman and Flaunting it', *The New York Times*, 16 March 1997, CN12; R.F. Foster, *The Irish Story: Telling Tales and Making it up in Ireland* (Oxford, 2002), 30–1. Foster somewhat misrepresents efforts to include the Irish Famine as part of a larger human rights curriculum. He claims that it was part of an effort to include the famine into the realm of 'Holocaust Studies.' Margaret Kelleher criticised Foster's characterisation of American curricular efforts in her talk on 'Hunger in History: Monuments to the Great Famine', but left these criticisms out of the published version of her talk, see the video of 'Hunger in History' at <http://frontrow.bc.edu/program/kelleher/> [accessed 28 April 2010] and Margaret Kelleher, 'Hunger and History: Monuments to the Great Irish Famine', *Textual Practice*, 16 (2002), 249–76. See more on this in this essay, below.

University, to lead an ongoing discussion about the significance of the famine. In 2000, as part of a larger reconstruction of its main library, Quinnipiac established a major commemorative site dedicated specifically to the famine on its Mount Carmel campus. This consisted of a large collection of famine art contained in a museum-style display room. The room also included a significant body of interpretative materials on the history and impact of the Great Irish Famine. To create this *'An Gorta Mór'* special collection, the University secured a major donation from two of its most prominent supporters, Murray and Marvin Lender, both of American-Jewish descent. In the decade since the establishment of the *An Gorta Mór* room, the University has built 'one of the most extensive collections of art and literature in America devoted to Ireland's Great Famine.'² The University uses this collection to promote itself among the Irish-American community in the northeast, frequently advertising the collection in Irish cultural publications, advertising it on television during the broadcast of the St Patrick's Day parade, and most recently mounting an exhibition of its art collection at the Irish consulate in New York City. This paper will examine the history of efforts to raise the visibility of the famine in the Irish-American diaspora and will analyse the efforts by Quinnipiac University to create a commemorative site that offers an interpretation of the famine that speaks in particular to Americans of Irish descent.

Contemporary controversies over the representation of the Irish famine in America began around the time that commemoration of the sesquicentennial started in Ireland during 1995. The timing and content of these commemorative efforts were almost immediately the source of controversy, both in Ireland and around the world. Some, like the eminent famine scholar Cormac Ó Gráda, publically complained that the commemorations had 'jumped the gun' by beginning in 1995, a date too early to mark the anniversary of any significant excess mortality or even widespread hunger in Ireland.³ Others criticised

² <http://www.thegreathunger.org/>. This website was originally developed by one of Quinnipiac's reference librarians, Terry Ballard, as a semi-independent website. The site has more recently been administered directly by Quinnipiac through its office of Public Affairs in conjunction with the Information Technology department and the Arnold Bernhard Library. The author now serves as a consultant in the ongoing development of the site.

³ Cormac Ó Gráda, 'Making Irish Famine History in 1995,' *History Workshop Journal*, 42

both the form and content of these commemorative events. R.F. Foster, in particular, has derided much famine commemoration as either ‘theme parks’ or efforts toward a ‘therapeutic catharsis.’⁴

This essay will not seek to engage in a broad analysis of famine commemoration, but instead will focus on the uniquely American aspects of the politics and uses of famine remembrance over the past two decades. This issue, as we shall see, takes on a rather different cast when examined from the perspective of the diaspora; discussions central to the debate within Ireland, quite naturally, have less relevance when considered from across the Atlantic. Similarly, the criticisms that have been put forward by Ó Gráda, Foster and others concerning the commemorative process may have less relevance, or indeed even prove to be simply unfounded, when considered from an American perspective. Thus, an examination of the process of famine commemoration in America can lend an important corrective to some of its most strident critics; at the same time it can bring us to a deeper appreciation of the critical perspectives the experience of the diaspora bring to native historical interpretations.

Controversies over famine remembrance and commemoration in the United States date to 1996. The experience of political debate over famine commemoration and education, however, was significantly prefigured by debates that unfolded in Canada during the previous decade. At that time, the Canadian government undertook measures to create a Parks Canada site at Grosse Île in the St Lawrence River.⁵ The government’s intention, apparently, was to create a centre on the island focused on the history of Canadian immigration that might be made to parallel the reconstruction of Ellis Island in the United States. The main theme of the proposed site was to be ‘Canada: Land of Welcome and Hope’.

This plan was controversial from the start, since the island was the site of a mass grave of newly-arrived Irish immigrants who had died from a massive outbreak of typhus in 1847. Organised opposition to the Parks Canada plan rapidly developed from a vocal group of Canadians—primarily

(1996), 87.

⁴ Foster, *The Irish Story*, 29–32.

⁵ This undertaking was first discussed by the Canadian government in the 1980s. For a brief discussion of the early politics of this decision see Kathleen O’Brien, ‘Famine Commemorations: Visual Dialogues, Visual Silences’ in David A. Valone and Christine Kinealy (eds) *Ireland’s Great Hunger: Silence, Memory and Commemoration* (Lanham, Md., 2002), 282–3 and Lorrie Blair, ‘(De)Constructing the Irish Famine Memorial in Contemporary Quebec’ in *ibid.*, 311–29.

of Irish descent—who banded together to form Action Grosse Île, a group devoted to ‘ensure that the mass graves of the Irish Famine victims of 1847 [be] perpetuated as the main theme of the National Historic Park on Grosse Île and as a permanent monument to the Irish role in the building of Canada’.⁶ The Canadian controversies over the representation of the national park site eventually termed ‘Grosse Île and the Irish Memorial National Historic Site’ thus were resolved through a great amount of attention being paid to the events that are referred to carefully during the guided tours of the island as ‘the Irish tragedy’.⁷

This was the exact opposite result of what had been suggested in the early documents created by Parks Canada as they set forth a plan to develop Grosse Île into a heritage site: the proposed development plan from 1992 had asserted that ‘there should be not too much emphasis on the tragic aspects’ of the island’s history.⁸ Today, however, the official Parks Canada website contains an interpretive essay dated September 1995 by André Charbonneau recounting the circumstances surrounding the typhus outbreak and mass grave. Perhaps not surprisingly given that this is an official governmental website, the essay focuses on the epic and unprecedented scale of the immigration to Canada during the course of the famine and the fact that the immigrants were ‘[a]lready weakened by malnutrition and starvation, they had been crowded aboard unsanitary sailboats, unfit for transporting human beings. They reached their destination in a deplorable state, many already infected with typhus’. Significantly, the page makes no mention at all of the British other than to state that the largest number of ships departed from Liverpool. It is careful to note, though, that a far greater total of ships came directly from Dublin, Cork, Sligo and Limerick.⁹ It may be that the British colonial context is entirely obvious and therefore bears no greater mention. Still, the discussion of the famine itself—of mass starvation, land clearances, and widespread outbreaks of disease—on the Parks Canada site is minimal and no interpretive effort is put into understanding either the historical background or the historiography

⁶ From the programme guide for the 1997 Irish Person of the Year Award in Canada. Quoted in Blair, ‘(De)Constructing the Irish Famine Memorial’, 314.

⁷ This was the phrase used repeatedly by the English-language tour guides at the site during my visit in August, 2009.

⁸ Parks Canada, *Grosse Île: Proposed Development Plan*, as quoted in Blair, ‘(De)Constructing the Irish Famine Memorial’, 314.

⁹ André Charbonneau, ‘History—1847: A Tragic Year at Grosse Île’, Parks Canada website <http://www.pc.gc.ca/eng/lhn-nhs/qc/grosseile/natcul/natcul1/b.aspx> [accessed 6 May 2010].

of the event that caused the emigration. This is in keeping with the policy of a revised statement by Parks Canada regarding the interpretive focus it was to adopt toward the history of the island. This statement explicitly rejected bringing to bear historical events ‘beyond the borders of Canada’.¹⁰ Such efforts to contain an international historical event like the famine within national borders is clearly fraught with all kinds of difficulties, not the least of which is the completely agnostic position adopted by Parks Canada concerning the historicising of the famine as a discrete historical event. Nonetheless, according to one sympathetic account by a member of Action Grosse Île, the experience at the park site itself as designed by Park Canada represents a ‘vindication of a four-year-long campaign to prevent Parks Canada from turning it into a Canadian Ellis Island.’¹¹

Similar disagreements over the modern significance and contemporary politics of famine remembrance soon erupted in the United States. Public controversies over the interpretation of the famine within the context of the sesquicentennial commemoration began to heat up when New York State Assemblyman Joseph Crowley introduced a bill into the legislature that sought to add ‘the mass starvation of Ireland from 1845 to 1850’ to the existing human rights curriculum that had been mandated into public schools by another legislative act in 1994. Crowley had been approached by Ann Garvey, then the president of the American Irish Teachers Association of New York, with the idea for the bill.¹² The legislation, according to Crowley, was intended to rectify the fact that the Irish Famine was a ‘tragedy in world history that hasn’t been given proper attention.’ Highlighting the famine in this particular context, however, which linked it pedagogically with other human rights violations including slavery and the Holocaust, rankled many. Governor George Pataki did little to quench the controversy when he declared upon signing the bill that ‘[h]istory teaches us the Great Hunger was not the result of a massive failure of the Irish potato crop but rather was the result of a deliberate campaign by the British to deny the Irish people the food they needed to survive’. Pataki also specifically noted the appropriateness of setting the famine within a broader human rights curriculum while also subtly connecting it with the

¹⁰ Parks Canada, *Supplement Grosse Ile: Proposed Development Concept*, as quoted in Blair, ‘(De)Constructing the Irish Famine Memorial’, 315.

¹¹ Michael Quigley, ‘Canada’s Island Famine Memorial’, *History Ireland*, 5 (1997), 26.

¹² Thomas J. Archdeacon, ‘The Irish Famine in American School Curricula’, *Éire-Ireland: A Journal of Irish Studies*, 37 (2002), 137–8. Archdeacon also traces a parallel history of efforts by James Mullen and others to include study of the famine within the New Jersey curriculum on Holocaust Education.

larger national debate on abortion, another issue very close to the hearts of many American Irish Catholics: ‘it is my sincere hope,’ he wrote, ‘that our state’s pupils will . . . develop a respect and universal concern for human rights, the sanctity of human life and a toleration of other races’.¹³

Pataki’s declaration set off a storm of controversy that soon stretched across the Atlantic and caused the political leadership in the Governor’s office to reach out to various professional historians to provide their expert opinion on his interpretation of the famine.¹⁴ Some might argue that these debates became particularly testy due to the possibility that increased scrutiny of the British role in the famine might inflame the ongoing and delicate peace process in Northern Ireland. Whether the underlying motivation was historical or political, Pataki’s rhetoric quickly drew criticism from some scholars and many in the political community, including an official protest from the British Embassy in Washington. John Kerr, the British ambassador, was incensed by the implicit comparison of the famine with the Nazi extermination of the Jews: ‘it seems to me rather insulting to the many millions who suffered and died in concentration camps across Europe to imply that their man-made fate was in any way analogous to the natural disaster in Ireland a century before’. Even the vice president of the American Historical Association’s teaching committee was critical of the bill’s apparent endorsement of a genocide interpretation of the famine ‘being mandated this way into the curriculum’.¹⁵

It was in the midst of these developments that Quinnipiac president John Lahey, acting in his role as the Grand Marshall of the 1997 parade, weighed in on the various debates over educational curricula, famine commemoration and even the issue of the historical interpretation of the famine. Lahey participated in the public debate over the passage of the bill in the New York State legislature and was particularly vocal in defence of governor Pataki’s insistence that the famine could be likened to the Holocaust. In December 1996, Lahey published an opinion piece in the British *Guardian* newspaper entitled ‘A Hunger for Justice.’ There, he made the case that ‘when all the facts are known about England’s conquest in Ireland between 1500 and

¹³ As quoted in *ibid.*, 139.

¹⁴ Scholars that were contacted include James S. Donnelly Jr and Thomas Archdeacon. See *ibid.*, 146.

¹⁵ All quotes in this paragraph are from Raymond Hernandez, ‘New Curriculum from Albany: The Irish Potato Famine, or One View of It’, *The New York Times*, 1 December 1996, 52. For a more detailed discussion of the political background of the curricula developed in New York and New Jersey see Archdeacon, ‘The Irish Famine in American School Curricula’, 135–9.

1850, any dispassionate, objective observer would conclude that the British government bears at least some responsibility for the death by starvation of 1.5 million Irish men, women and children'. This somewhat measured statement, however, came at the conclusion of the article. The opening of the piece was more polemical, arguing that '[t]his Great Hunger was more than a terrible natural disaster; it was also a human-rights violation by the British government, part of Britain's 700-year oppression of the Irish people'.¹⁶ The language marking the famine as a 'human-rights violation' was clearly an effort to echo the tone that had been set in the course of the debate that had unfolded just weeks earlier after the passage of the New York State curriculum revision. Discussions of the famine as a 'human-rights violation' by the British government highlighted the impact of the British presence in Ireland both during the nineteenth century and implicitly throughout the era of the Troubles in Northern Ireland. Lahey's article in *The Guardian* made this link explicit, arguing that 'understanding this period of Ireland's history will help put in further context and better perspective the current struggles in Northeastern Ireland and hopefully advance the fragile peace process that we all hope will result in a just and lasting peace accord'.¹⁷

Controversy over the passage of the bill, especially over the apparent effort to draw a parallel between the Great Famine and the Holocaust, continued to simmer throughout the fall and into the summer of 1997, particularly in an exchange of letters between Governor Pataki and Ambassador Kerr. This exchange was commented upon extensively in the Irish-American press. The *Irish Voice* and *Irish Echo* both criticised Pataki for apparently backing away from his earlier statement that the famine constituted a human-rights violation directly comparable to the Holocaust. Pataki, though, had not significantly softened his position despite the critical way that his words were received by more strident advocates in the New York Irish community. Pataki had merely denied that the law explicitly 'equated' the famine and the Holocaust.¹⁸

In the end, however, the political rhetoric surrounding the passage of the bill was quietened through both political and educational interventions. Politically, a public apology of sorts for the Great Irish Famine was issued by British Prime Minister Tony Blair in the summer of 1997. Blair admitted, '[t]hat one

¹⁶ John L. Lahey, 'A Hunger for Justice', *The Guardian*, 16 December 1996, 13. Portions of this article were reprinted as John L. Lahey, 'The Great Irish Hunger', *Quinnipiac Magazine*, 6 (1997), 28.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁸ George Pataki to John Kerr, 24 January 1997, as quoted in Archdeacon, 'The Irish Famine in American School Curricula', 146.

million people should have died in what was then part of the richest and most powerful nation in the world is something that still causes pain as we reflect on it today. Those who governed in London at the time failed their people'.¹⁹ At the same time, a careful and systematically constructed set of teaching materials on the famine was undertaken at Hofstra University by a team of educators led by Maureen Murphy, Maureen McCann Miletta and Alan Singer. This New York State famine curriculum was several years in the making and was the product of a coordinated team of academics and educators that included some of the most prominent famine scholars. For their part, Murphy, Miletta and Singer explicitly reject the assertion that the famine constituted genocide, at least according to the most widely cited definition of the term. In contrast, they very clearly articulate that 'we do not believe that British policies during the Great Irish Famine meet the criteria for genocide established by the United Nations (1951)', although they concede that it is 'a legitimate subject for discussion'.²⁰

The issue of British culpability with regard to the famine is not, however, a central theme in the New York State curriculum. Rather, the stated goal of the curriculum is to set the story of the Irish Famine into the history of the modern world. It argues both for the centrality of the famine in shaping the history of modern times and its use as a case study in broader issues concerning the human condition through what its authors call 'essential questions' such as: 'Is there enough to go around (i.e. food, clothes, water?); Is history a history of progress?; When is law unjust?; Who owns what and why?' These broad questions are applicable both to the history of the famine and to other historical episodes that are part of the human rights curriculum, including African slavery and the Holocaust. But they clearly also have a wider resonance with political, social and economic issues at the heart of contemporary crises and debates that students encounter in their daily lives and thus provide the basis for a wider questioning of the contours of the present and future condition of the human race.²¹

This large-scale and comprehensive effort to create an educational curriculum about the famine, however, provides an interesting contrast to the

¹⁹ Kathy Marks, 'Blair Issues Apology for Irish Potato Famine', *The Independent*, 2 June 1997, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/blair-issues-apology-for-irish-potato-famine-1253790.html> [accessed 20 May 2010].

²⁰ Maureen Murphy, Maureen McCann Miletta and Alan Singer, 'Designing the New York State Great Irish Famine Curriculum Guide' in Valone and Kinealy (eds), *Ireland's Great Hunger*, 377.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 383.

private and indeed even personal effort undertaken by John Lahey in his role as the president of Quinnipiac University to create a famine commemoration and education site. Under Lahey's leadership, Quinnipiac has undergone a dramatic transformation marked by bold initiatives and sometimes controversial actions.²² During the year that Lahey was the Grand Marshal of the St Patrick's Day parade, the institution was at what might be described as an inflection point. Since Lahey had arrived as president in the late 1980s, Quinnipiac had gradually expanded its enrolment from a low of around 2,000 to more than 3,500. It had constructed a new Health Sciences Centre, a Mass Communications building, and a Business School. Quinnipiac had also purchased a Law School from the University of Bridgeport, an institution in the midst of a deep financial and governance crisis, in the early 1990s. The increase in Quinnipiac's enrollment and the growth and diversification of its academic programmes suggested that by the late 1990s the institution was poised to take on a new and more prominent regional and even national profile. To this end, in the years immediately following Lahey's tenure as Grand Marshall, the institution unveiled two new initiatives to further its institutional growth: it announced that it would become a 'university' and it undertook a major expansion and renovation of its main library.

It was in coordination with the second effort that Lahey realised an opportunity to continue his efforts to engage in discussions about the famine. Given that the newly-declared University was set to reconstruct its library, Lahey was engaged in raising funds to support the effort—funded in part by a one million dollar donation from A. Van H. Bernhard, the largest such gift ever given to Quinnipiac at that time.²³ In coordination with the reconstruction of the library, Lahey secured a second and presumably smaller gift that would be used to fund a collection of Irish Famine commemorative art. This gift came from Murray and Marvin Lender, members of the Lender family who had made their fortune selling frozen bagels in grocery stores across the United States. The two had a long association with Quinnipiac and the area. The Lenders' father, Harry Lender, had emigrated from Poland to New Haven in 1927 and had established the bagel business there in 1929.²⁴

²² Examples of these include decertifying the faculty union, expanding Quinnipiac into three separate campuses, and vastly expanding the university's enrolment. For an analysis of many of these developments see Goldie Blumenstyk, 'A Private University Builds on its Confidence', *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 7 March 2008, A1.

²³ 'About the Library,' Quinnipiac University's website <https://myq.quinnipiac.edu/IT%20%20Libraries/ABL/Pages/AboutTheLibrary.aspx> [accessed 16 May 2010].

²⁴ Kate Aiken, 'Playground Named for Famous Bagel Maker', *The Yale Daily News*, 13

Murray was an alumnus of the College from 1950, and is a long-time member of the Quinnipiac Board of Trustees. According to official sources within Quinnipiac, the donation came as a result of conversations that took place between Murray Lender and John Lahey during the year that Lahey served as Grand Marshal of the parade. According to Lahey, ‘Murray took to heart what he had learned about the famine. Like so many, he was not aware of its true magnitude. He thought it was so important, that we could make a difference and he wanted to give a gift to the new library that would be dedicated to the Great Hunger.’²⁵

The exact content of the room was largely shaped by Lahey himself through his personal association with Des Kenny of Kenny’s Booksellers and Art Gallery in Galway. Kenny’s was, in many ways, a perfect match for the *An Gorta Mór* collection that Lahey envisioned for the new Quinnipiac library. Although Kenny’s had begun in 1940 as a book trader specialising in rare and antiquarian books, the business had expanded into an art gallery as well by the 1950s.²⁶ Having convinced the Lender family to support an effort to create an educational site dedicated to the famine as part of the library reconstruction, the notion that a scholarly and artistic collection might be the best combination for the Quinnipiac campus was not a far stretch. Kenny’s provided both a model of such a combination and a ready source from which the collection could be obtained.

The development of an educational resource on the Great Hunger that combined a scholarly collection with an installation of famine commemorative art was fortuitous. Scholarly interest in the famine had been exploding throughout the 1990s as the sesquicentennial approached.²⁷ At the same time, a huge outpouring of famine commemorative art was produced, some of it a by-product of the more than eighty famine memorials and public monuments created around the world since 1990.²⁸ Furthermore, Quinnipiac had room to strengthen its position in the arts. Since the College had begun

September 2007, <http://www.yaledailynews.com/news/city-news/2007/09/13/playground-named-for-famed-bagelmaker/> [accessed 16 May 2010].

²⁵ ‘Collection on *An Gorta Mór*—the Great Hunger—Unveiled’, *Quinnipiac Magazine*, 10 (2001), 4.

²⁶ <http://www.thekennygallery.ie/help/aboutus/> [accessed 8 November 2010].

²⁷ For a summary of this work, see Kelleher, ‘Hunger and History’, 249–50.

²⁸ Emily Mark Fitzgerald, ‘Toward a Famine Art History: Invention, Reception and Repetition from the Nineteenth Century to the Twentieth’ in David A. Valone (ed.), *Ireland’s Great Hunger, vol. 2: Relief, Representation and Remembrance* (Lanham, Md., 2010), 181.

as a business school and had expanded into the health sciences fields in the 1950s, its arts and humanities programs were limited; even after expanding to become a comprehensive institution in the 1960s and 1970s — offering degrees in the social science and humanities — the College continued to have no degree programs in the arts throughout the 1990s. Thus, creating an artistic corpus for the campus made a certain amount of institutional sense, as did adding a special collection to the University's modest library acquisitions.

The opening of the room took place soon after the dedication of Quinnipiac's newly reconstructed Arnold Bernhard Library in September of 2001. Eminent famine scholar Christine Kinealy was brought in to speak about famine commemoration and the recent historiography of the famine. In addition, sculpture Margaret Lyster Chamberlain, who Quinnipiac had commissioned to produce a work of famine commemorative art specifically for the *An Gorta Mór* collection, attended the opening to greet dignitaries and to discuss her sculpture 'The Leave-Taking'.²⁹ The collection contained a wide variety of famine art, primarily in the form of sculpture but also including paintings and a limited collection of nineteenth-century etchings and engravings from publications such as *The Illustrated London News*. Artists represented in the collection include John Behan, Niall Bruton, John Coll and Michael Farrell. The room itself was laid out by Centerbrook Architects and was designed to suggest the shape of the hold of a ship, symbolically linking those who enter the room with the immigrant experience of a sea journey.³⁰

In addition to a large collection of recent commemorative art, the room contains a number of interpretive displays that educate visitors about the famine itself and its historical significance, particularly with regard to its impact on America. These interpretive panels include brief historical interpretations of various topics related to the famine, including 'Historical Context for the Great Hunger', 'The Potato Blight and the Great Hunger', 'British Government's Response to the Great Hunger', 'Exports from Ireland to England During the Great Hunger', 'Emigration, Coffin Ships and the Great Hunger' and 'Irish in America and the Great Hunger'. Many of these interpretive panels contain extensive quotations from scholarly sources and from contemporary accounts of the famine.

²⁹ 'Collection on *An Gorta Mór* — *The Great Hunger* — Unveiled', *Quinnipiac Magazine*, 10 (2001), 4.

³⁰ <http://www.thegreathunger.org/AboutCollection/HistoryofRoom.asp> [accessed 19 May 2010].

The room is dominated by Chamberlain's 'The Leave-Taking', which is positioned as its centrepiece, and by a large stone tablet on the wall that provides the most comprehensive statement in the room about the famine itself:

Ireland's Great Famine or the Great Hunger, as it is more commonly referred to today, ranks among the worst tragedies in the sweep of human history. Between 1845 and 1850, approximately 1.5 million Irish men, women and children died of starvation or related diseases. By 1855, more than two million more fled Ireland to avoid a similar fate. The combined effect of this death and flight cut the population of Ireland in half, from eight to four million, in a single decade. By the end of the nineteenth century, only two million people remained in Ireland. The decimation of her population makes Ireland's Great Hunger both the worst chapter in the country's history, and, arguably, the single worst catastrophe in nineteenth-century Europe.

The Lender Family Special Collection Room, with its art and library materials, will serve as an educational and scholarly resource to increase the awareness and improve the understanding, of the causes and consequences of Ireland's Great Hunger. As part of its educational mission of teaching, research and service to the community, Quinnipiac University is proud to take a leadership role in educating people in this country and throughout the world about the Great Hunger and the lessons to be learned from this terrible tragedy.³¹

While this statement largely steers clear of making an overt interpretation of the causes of the famine, it also overstates the magnitude of the population decrease in Ireland throughout the later nineteenth century. According to the census conducted in 1901, the population of Ireland at the beginning of the twentieth century was 4,458,775.³² Both the artwork and some of the interpretive materials in the room also contain a significant interpretive viewpoint. There are several panels that address the exportation of food from Ireland during the famine years and the paintings 'Black '47' and 'Wounded Wonder '47' by Michael Farrell bring British culpability for the famine to the forefront. The interpretative materials in the room published by Quinnipiac's

³¹ This quote appears on a large stone tablet on display in the *An Gorta Mór* collection in the Arnold Bernhard Library at Quinnipiac University.

³² Ireland Census Office, *Census of Ireland, 1901: Summary Tables* (Dublin, 1903), iii.

Office of Public Affairs also carry a significant political undertone. For instance, one panel notes that '[a] rift still exists between the Irish and the English, resulting in years of conflict and challenges to peace and justice in all of Ireland. Since 1922 the twenty-six counties that make up the Republic of Ireland exist as an independent Irish nation while the six counties of northeastern Ireland remain to this day under English control as part of the United Kingdom'.³³

Other interpretive materials produced for the room also set the famine into a particular interpretive framework. 'An Educational Guide' developed for the room by the Public Affairs office at Quinnipiac contains an unattributed essay on 'The History of a Disaster'. It features a thumbnail history of Irish-English relations, focusing on the military conquest by the English, the effects of the penal laws in the eighteenth century and the growing poverty and population expansion in Ireland after 1800. It also asserts that 'for those who remained in Ireland and survived the famine, a long-standing animosity for England blossomed into hatred'. With regard to the inadequate response of the British government to the crisis, the pamphlet argues

[t]he government did implement some public works projects, as well as soup kitchen programs and poor houses. However, in most cases these efforts were slow to materialise, inadequately funded and poorly run. As a result, many people view the British government's lack of effective action during the Great Hunger as an example of its callous disregard for human life.³⁴

The *An Gorta Mór* collection, then, is suggestive of the deep emotions stirred up by the famine within the diaspora and the passions that it generates within that community. Although the room was born from the interpretive and curricular debates that spun out of the 1990s commemoration in Ireland, a more significant historical context for Quinnipiac's collection might well be the evolving peace process in Northern Ireland and the shifting economic and demographic foundation of college students in the northeastern United States. With regard to the former issue, it is not difficult to read through the

³³ 'The Lender Family Special Collection — Arnold Bernhard Library — Quinnipiac University', interpretive pamphlet designed and produced by Cheney & Company, dated April 2004.

³⁴ 'An Gorta Mór — The Great Hunger. An Educational Guide', undated and unpaginated. Published by the Quinnipiac University Office of Public Affairs.

documents and interpretive materials on display in the Great Hunger room, as well as the public statements made by John Lahey, to find support for Irish nationalism. At the same time, the University's growth and its dependence on the upwardly mobile and upper middle-class market within the northeast makes an appeal to individuals of Irish descent a coherent, and so far successful, marketing strategy.

Finally, since the collection is essentially a private one, under the control of the University, it has been essentially freed from the political entanglements of the various famine curricula that have been put forward by New York and New Jersey. In this way, the *An Gorta Mór* collection might be argued to hold a unique status as a source to discuss the continuing evolution of the place of the Irish famine in modern historical consciousness. Without question, it represents to some degree the interests of the University and its president, but nonetheless it says much about the uses of historical memory, of commemoration and their relationship to economic, political and intellectual power and leadership. In this way, the room might represent a purer way to understand the authentic views and desires concerning the famine of at least a portion of the Irish diaspora in America.

Quinnipiac University