

## Ian Mitchell's Ireland-related **BOOK RECOMMENDATIONS**

43 – *The Great Irish Famine*  
(17 January 2020)

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### **THE GREAT IRISH FAMINE: a History in Four Lives**

**Author:** Enda Delaney

**Publisher:** [Gill Books](#), 2014

(available on *Amazon*, [click on cover image for link](#))

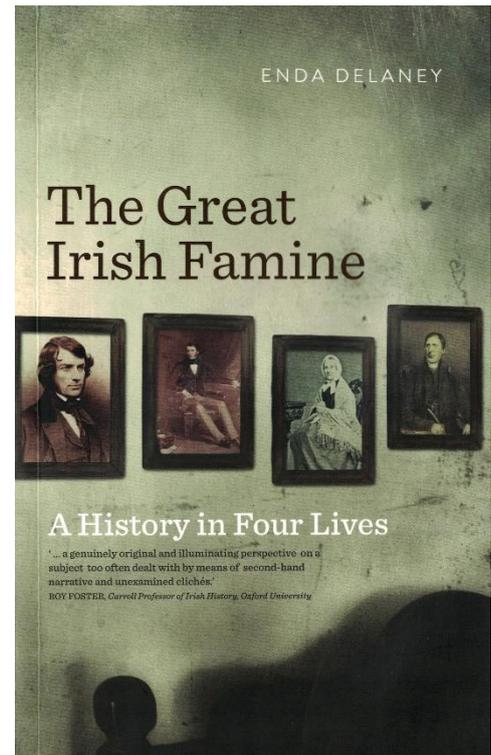
**Descriptor:** Four parallel part-biographies of people importantly involved in the Irish Famine of 1846-9

**RusRoL relevance:** *Shows how British imperialism worked in mid-nineteenth century Ireland which, despite being part of the United Kingdom, did not have full reciprocity within the domestic political structure and was therefore treated semi-colonially. For all the (relatively) good intentions, this was based in part on STATUS (top-down) rather than contract CONTRACT (horizontal) relationships.*

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**Reason to read:** A well-written and authoritative *new* look at one of the greatest tragedies in modern British history, namely the great Irish potato famine of 1846-9. The subject is important because in Ireland the suffering has been instrumentalized for political purposes by nationalist politicians almost continuously since the late nineteenth century. Many others, from media pundits to garrulous bar-hoppers, have used it as a stick to beat the English with. They haven't complained but it is surely time to take the poison out of politics in the British Isles. An important step in that direction would be the demystification of history. It is therefore a refreshing change to have a serious account of this ghastly tragedy without either nationalist posturing, emotional wallowing (e.g. Robert Kee) or politically correct virtue signalling.

Professor Delaney describes the involvement of four individuals in the Famine. They are: John MacHale, the Bishop of Tuam, in Co. Galway, who was in the thick of the religious education debate, and whose interventions in the relief effort were often counter-productive; Elizabeth Smith, a Scottish landowner's wife in Co. Wicklow (daughter of Grant of Rothiemurchus; she was born in the house next door to Nicola Sturgeon's official residence in Charlotte Square, Edinburgh) who did her best to help in her locality and who, importantly, kept a detailed record of what she saw; John Mitchel, the Glasgow-educated Protestant from Derry who became a semi-revolutionary Irish nationalist because he thought



British rule exploited the Irish and who was convicted of treason and transported to Australia, from where he escaped to the United States where he ended his days as a journalist campaigning in defence of slavery (his two sons served in the Confederate Army); and Charles Trevelyan, the civil servant who dealt with the Famine and who later helped introduce rationality and meritocracy into the British bureaucracy through the famous Northcote-Trevelyan Report into the evils of patronage and sinecures in government service.

This is an attractive way of both telling the story and describing the background of internal empire as Britain imposed it on Ireland in the mid-nineteenth century. To my mind, the real villains were the more vocal representatives of the various churches involved: Catholics who loathed Protestants; Anglicans who despised the Irish; and evangelicals who sneered at and mistrusted Catholics. Irish local government officials contributed their share of villains and blockheads too. However, contrary to saloon bar wisdom, Professor Delaney suggests that the government in London did about as much as it reasonably could have done in the circumstances; it certainly *tried* to help, if sometimes rather cack-handedly. Thomas Baring and Lionel de Rothschild raised £470,000 for famine relief, then about the cost of an iron-clad battleship—say a billion today, at purchasing power parity. Queen Victoria headed the list of donors with a tactful £2,000 (upped after political protests from a more guarded £1,000). The Prime Minister gave a considerable sum from his own pocket. Even the Quakers—a non-conformist exception to the religious sectarianism—raised a massive £200,000. It must now be clear that the Sinn Fein/Corbynist allegations of British semi-genocide in Ireland are too ludicrous to take seriously anymore.

### ***Main talking points:***

1. “**Trevelyan was right.**” (p. 231) It takes guts to say that, even in modern and semi-rational Scotland, where we are taught that anti-Unionist Ireland is holy ground due to its successful resistance to “English Tory” rule. I am not aware of any historian who has been so blunt in, implicitly, condemning the received wisdom about the British approach to the famine. “In common with his political masters, the chancellor of the exchequer, Sir Charles Wood, and ultimately [the Prime Minister, Lord John] Russell, Trevelyan had a basic humanitarian concern to do as much as possible to assist the Irish poor.” (p. 160) That is *not* the view that you will hear echoed if you mention the subject in, say, Patrick Murtagh’s wonderful bar in Arvagh, Co. Cavan. What Trevelyan was “right” about was that the rural Irish poor had three options: reduce breeding numbers, emigrate or improve their agricultural productivity. *There was no fourth.* None of this was Trevelyan’s fault. He was living quietly in Clapham.
2. Professor Delaney notes that there were famine-level consequences of the destruction of the potato crop in 1740-1 (about 400,000 deaths), 1765, 1770, 1795, 1800-1, 1816-19, 1822 and 1830-1 (p. 43), yet the population trebled between 1750 and 1820 “from 2½ million to almost 7 million” (p. 44) and “by the early 1840s [it] was over 8 million”. (p. 45) Delaney then quotes Malthus: “Famine seems to be the last, most terrible resource of nature.” (p. 45) Without improved agricultural technology or emigration, the essential issue was: implacable nature versus the swarming Irish. Nature won. The British could have helped more, and Irish society could have been better organised and more sympathetic; both are true. But the ultimate issue was that if people needed 10 pounds of potatoes a day, as Delaney says they did to have a nutritious diet,

then Ireland would have had to produce *80 million pounds of potatoes a day*, every day, for all time, to avoid hunger. That just wasn't going to happen, especially given the poor quality of the soil in the west of Ireland. None of that was Trevelyan's fault either.

3. Of course, this does not affect the human point that any famine is a catastrophe, and this was an unusually terrible one. Elizabeth Smith's understanding of that was profound. The descriptions of what she saw are very moving—and she never went to places like Skibbereen in west Cork where some of the worst suffering occurred. Yet she could do nothing much to help in the face of the lack of co-operation she experienced, among both the local bureaucracy and her more unco-operative tenants and sub-tenants. The same applied to a landowner in Co. Roscommon, Major Mahan, who tried to rationalise the land-use on an estate he had inherited. He offered to pay personally for the costs of emigration to Canada for thousands of his tenants. He did so for several hundred, but vast majority refused, preferring eviction to taking a chance on a better future elsewhere. Major Mahan was subsequently murdered for his pains. (p. 195) Once again, none of that was Trevelyan's fault.

**Surprising points:** The number of *Irish* farmers of the better sort (kulaks, in Russian terms) who drove the rack-renting and evictions. They did more of this than the supposedly hated lairds, who were mainly English, and whose approach was closer to languid passivity than to active hostility towards those who could not pay their rent. In other words, this was really economic war, rather than the class/colonial war that it has been portrayed as ever since the late nineteenth century nationalists woke up to its political marketing potential after the emergence of the yellow press.

**Thought(s) provoked:** “Everyone, from landlords to the starving poor, looked to the government to remedy all problems.” (p. 148) That was not Trevelyan's fault either. However, it is the prevailing thought-cancer in Corbyn/Sturgeon circles, especially with regard to the things like the health service. The psycho-social lessons of the Irish famine have yet to be learned in socialist circles.

**Left-field:** The Irish should be grateful that their imperial masters were the British and not, for example, an aggressively socialist state like the Soviet Union. There, the people really were expected to be the hod-carriers of history. Famine was imposed deliberately, as government policy, by people like Stalin, who was Kommissar for Nationalities in the 1920s—in one aspect of his responsibilities, he was the local equivalent of Charles Trevelyan. He organised the murder of 6-7 million Ukrainians by means of an artificial famine in 1933. Ten years after that, he ordered the deportation of the entire Kalmyk people to Siberia and the deserts of northern Kazakhstan, as he did the Crimean Tatars, because he considered them, quite unjustly, to have been “disloyal” during the Great Patriotic War. If the Irish had made a nuisance of themselves in the socialist paradise, they would undoubtedly have suffered a similar fate. By contrast, the worst that can be said of “free market” Trevelyan was that he permitted the export of corn while Irish potatoes were rotting in the fields. But Professor Delaney comments: “If a ban on grain exports had been introduced in late 1846 it is by no means a certainty that this would have made food more accessible to the poor.” (p. 135)

One wonders just how much has been contributed to international famine relief in recent times by the type of self-righteously anti-English businessman or media sage who steams down Ireland's EU-financed motorways in his Japanese SUV while singing along soulfully to [The Fields of Athenry](#).

**Style:** Clear; not intrusively academic.

**Publishing quality:** Fine, some nice pictures and captions.

**Smile(s):** While evangelicals blamed the new toleration of Catholics, including an increased grant to the Maynooth seminary, for the “black potatoes” (p. 85), the people of the west blamed the destruction of the potato crop on “a purported defeat of the Connacht fairies by their northern counterparts”. (p. 83)

**Author:** Enda Delaney, though a Dublin man himself, is Professor of Modern History at the University of Edinburgh.

**Link(s):** The only clip I could find relevant to the Famine and the British-Irish relationship:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zJ-0VBCU62o>

**Overall recommendation level:** VERY HIGH

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**About the reviewer:** Ian Mitchell is the author of four books, including [Isles of the West](#) and [The Justice Factory](#). He is writing a comparative study of Russian and Western constitutional history to be called *Russia and the Rule of Law*—hence the “RusRoL Relevance” section at the top. He can be contacted at: [ian@ianmitchellonline.co.uk](mailto:ian@ianmitchellonline.co.uk).

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