

The Famine Road

Idle as trout in light Colonel Jones
these Irish, give them no coins at all;
their bones
need toil, their characters no less. Trevelyan's
seal blooded the deal table. The Relief
Committee deliberated: Might it be safe,
Colonel, to give them roads, roads to force
From nowhere, going nowhere of course?

*"one out of every ten and then
another third of those again
women - in a case like yours."*

Sick, directionless they worked; fork, stick
were iron years away; after all could
they not blood their knuckles on rock, suck
April hailstones for water and for food?
Why for that, cunning as housewives, each eyed –
as if at a corner butcher - the other's buttock.

*"anything may have caused it, spores
a childhood accident; one sees
day after day these mysteries."*

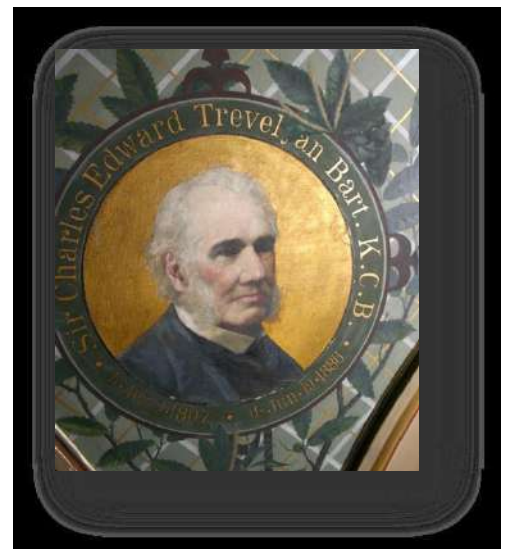


Dusk: they will work tomorrow without him.
They know it and walk clear. He has become
a typhoid pariah, his blood tainted, although
he shares it with some there. No more than snow
attends its own flakes where they settle
and melt, will they pray by his death rattle.

*"You never will, never you know
but take it well woman, grow
your garden, keep house, good-bye."*

"It has gone better than we expected, Lord
Trevelyan, sedition, idleness, cured
in one. From parish to parish, field to field;
the wretches work till they are quite worn,
then fester by their work. We march the corn
to the ships in peace. This Tuesday I saw bones
out of my carriage window. Your servant Jones.

*"Barren, never to know the load
of his child in you, what is your body
now if not a famine road?"*



From 'The War Horse' collection (1975)



Background:

Charles Edward Trevelyan (1807-1896) was a British civil servant and colonial administrator charged with overseeing food supplies to the Irish during the Famine. He has been heavily criticised for the way he handled the situation as he denied emergency relief and viewed the famine as the fault of the Irish people. 'The greatest evil we have to face is not the physical evil of the famine,' he wrote, 'but the moral evil of the selfish, perverse and turbulent character of the Irish people.' In an 1848 article in the *Edinburgh Review* - at the height of the famine - he applauded the fact that starvation encouraged migration and supported the view that God was punishing the Irish Catholics for their superstitious ways and adherence to 'popery'. He was knighted by Queen Victoria that same year for his work on the famine.¹

Boland on 19th Century history:

"It's the century where writers engaged with all kinds of defeat and began to formulate their responses. It's instructive to see them struggling at the crossroads of self-awareness and language.

"But of course it's also the century of the Famine. And I see that as a watershed: A powerful once-and-for-all disruption of any kind of heroic history. The most wrenching part of the story of the Famine is how utterly defenseless people were in the face of a disaster they couldn't control. It's also surprising to see how little the writing of that time actually turns to what was happening.'²

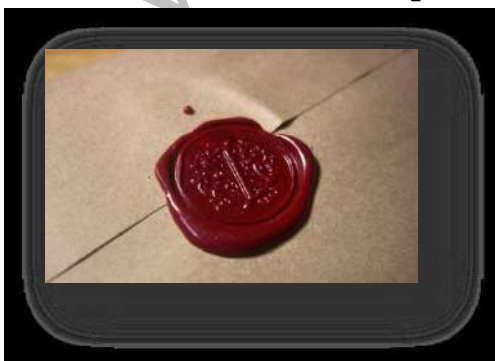
¹ From an article by John Meagher – Irish Independent -30/09/2006

² From an article by JP O'Malley in The Irish Examiner – 11/01/2014

Summary and analysis:

Eavan Boland keeps herself out of this poem: there is no 'I', but the strength of her feelings is clear nonetheless. The poem is divided into two sections; in one we hear the voice of Trevelyan and Jones and in the other we hear a doctor speaking to a patient. Boland links the suffering of the Irish during the famine to the suffering of a childless woman. The plight of the famine victims and of the woman are treated with detached disdain and a distinct lack of sympathy by those in authority.

The poem opens with a letter from Trevelyan to Jones in which he dismisses the suffering of the Irish and says they deserve 'no coins' or any sort of relief. Instead, he suggests that these starving and sick people be put to work in order to cure their inherent laziness and improve their characters. His tone is peremptory: in his arrogance Trevelyan presumes to know what is best for the Irish people. The language used in the letter is both familiar and foreign as Boland uses slightly archaic phrasing and similes: 'Idle as trout', 'give them no coins at all'. Trevelyan's ignorance is also clear in these opening lines. After all, the Irish were peasant labourers and were well used to lives of toil and hardly likely to have had the luxury of being idle. If they weren't working it was not out of choice but because the potato crop had failed and they had nothing to farm.



The red wax on the seal of Trevelyan's letter 'blooded' the light pine table which

foreshadows the deaths which will follow his instructions.

The Relief Committee deliberate on the best way to handle the situation and tentatively ask if it might be an idea to set the Irish to work building roads that go nowhere. This suggestion is a mixture of the cruel and the ridiculous: the suffering and starving Irish will be worked so hard at this pointless task that they will be unable to threaten the safety of those responsible for their situation. There is no thought of the safety of the poor and the dying. The roads will lead nowhere, just as most of these people's lives will lead nowhere.

The poem now moves on to the voice of a doctor speaking to a female patient. Neither is named and the doctor's speech is introduced mid-sentence (The line does not begin with a capital letter). He dispassionately discusses the woman's health issue in terms of statistics and averages. His tone reminds us of the detachment and coldness with which Trevelyan summed up an entire people as 'these Irish'; here the doctor sees the woman in front of him as merely another of these women who present with a similar condition. We don't yet know what the woman's complaint is but it is being treated as something quite common.

The description of the workers on the famine road is heart-breaking. Though they were dying, they had no choice but to work on this pointless road. The word 'directionless' does not only refer to the road going nowhere but also shows us that the people's lives were going nowhere. They are reduced to the level of stone age people, bleeding their hands on rocks as they position them to make the road. For them, 'fork, stick / were iron years away'. They have no implements and are like animals as they labour. The rhetorical question which asks if they could not sustain themselves on the harsh April hailstones



is clearly ironic: not only is water the bare minimum necessary to sustain life but this is water in its harshest form – hailstones bombarding the workers.

The workers' plight means that they are driven to looking at one another much as cannibals might eye up a prime piece of meat. The juxtaposition of this image with the everyday image a housewife selecting a joint in a 'corner butcher' is horrifying as it makes the idea of feasting on the dead flesh of fellow workers as normal as choosing a piece of meat for dinner.

We move back to the doctor talking to the patient. He tells her in a rather offhand way that 'anything might have caused it', be it spores – which makes us think of the spores causing the potato blight – or a mere accident in childhood. The doctor is blasé. He does not seem to realise the devastating effect of his words, just as Trevelyan seemed to show no understanding of the effect his words would have on the lives of tens of thousands of innocents.

It is dusk - a time of transition between light and darkness – and one of the workers is clearly dying and will not see daybreak. In an unnatural reversal of the usual rituals surrounding death, those close to the dying man edge away. He is a 'pariah' or an outcast and even though some of those around him are his family they ignore him in his last hours. The suffering the people have been forced to endure has dehumanised them and they are no more concerned with the passing of one of their own than a snowflake is by the melting of another snowflake.

The doctor gives some advice to the woman that he feels is practical and worthwhile. If she busies herself in the garden and in the house – much as the Irish in Famine times were kept busy building pointless roads – then she will



be better off. This makes us think of the starving Irish who were ordered to do the same thing in order to earn food – were they better off as a result of it or was it an imperious command dealt from on high? Either way there is a distance between the people who think they know best for those who are suffering and those who are actually suffering. In both cases the language is distant and rather pompous. From the woman's point of view, keeping her house and garden tidy is as pointless as building a famine road. Her efforts are going nowhere. She wants a child and a future and the doctor's words are meaningless platitudes at best and insulting condescension at worst.

Colonel Jones' report to Trevelyan tells how the Irish are 'quite worn' by their labours and that they are in no position to rebel against those shipping potentially life-saving food out of the country. The certainty of the suppression of the Irish is contained in his words 'I saw bones / out of my carriage window'. That Jones should be travelling in a carriage while the Irish laboured and died on the road highlights the discrepancy between those in authority and those they are supposed to be. The Irish are not people now but merely 'bones'. They have been completely dehumanised by their suffering and their treatment at the hands of the British.

The poem ends with the woman's thoughts. She bleakly views her body like a famine road going nowhere. This is a strange metaphor in that it implies the only purpose of a woman is to bear children.

In both narratives – the story of the famine and the story of the woman – there is a strong male voice. Trevelyan, Jones and the doctor are all seen as dominating and insensitive figures. If you were about to argue that we do not



know the sex of the doctor, I would draw your attention to the second last stanza in which his voice is heard:

*"You never will, never you know
but take it well woman, grow
your garden, keep house, good-bye."*

It is highly unlikely that one woman would address another as 'woman'. By doing so, the doctor distances himself from his patient just as the Imperialist voices in the other narrative refer to the Irish as 'these Irish'; and 'the wretches'.

Boland's linking of the public and the private here is masterly. The intersection historical and the emotional is the oppression and the silencing of the victims. The comparison between the way the Irish were treated by the English and the way women have been treated in Irish society is explained as follows by Boland: 'Womanhood and Irishness are metaphors for one another. There are resonances of humiliation, oppression and silence in both of them and I think you can understand one better by experiencing the other.'³

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Image and Power: Women in Fiction in the Twentieth Century by Sarah Sceats, Gail Cunnigham 1996

