



Patrick Fitzgerald and Anthony Russell (eds), *John Mitchel, Ulster and the Great Famine*

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REFERENCES

Patrick Fitzgerald and Anthony Russell (eds), *John Mitchel, Ulster and the Great Famine*, Irish Academic Press (2017). ISBN-13:9781911024668, 224 p

- 1 This collection of essays is based upon the contributions to the annual Great Famine Commemoration of 2015, when the event was held for the first north of the border, in Newry. The occasion of the location of the conference provides the volume with one of its two central lines of questioning: most of the contributions thus set about revising the popular perception that Ulster got off rather lightly in the Famine, especially in comparison with the horrendous suffering witnessed by the South and West of Ireland. Because the implication of the stereotype could be that the North suffered less than the rest of the island because it was an area where the Protestant proportion of the population was higher (thus giving justification to accusations of Irish – Catholic – genocide), Anthony Russell reminds the reader that “it can no longer be claimed that the Great Famine [...] did not impact severely upon both communities in the North” (p. 73). Patrick Fitzgerald quotes the figures of a 19% decline in the Catholic population, as opposed to 18% for Protestants over the period of the Famine (p. 124), but the figure fails to tell the whole truth as it does not distinguish between population loss due to emigration and excess mortality. Indeed, both editors in their introduction establish that “population decline in the northern province during the Great Famine resulted disproportionately from the impact of emigration, as opposed to excess mortality or averted births” (p. ix).

- 2 From the methodological point of view, these inquiries into the fate of Ulster during the Famine are carried out through the study of little-known or previously unpublished primary sources, such as data on baptisms from Roman Catholic churches, which have been made available online in 2015, the diaries of Stephen De Vere, brother to poet Aubrey, or the passages from the reports of the Devon Commission relating to the Newry area. The volume thus contains exciting new research by world-class Famine scholars such as Cormac O Grada, Christine Kinealy or Cathal Poirteir, and confirms the trend in local assessments of the extent of the disaster, and insistence upon local variations in severity established by the publication in 2012 of Cork UP's *Atlas of the Irish Famine*. The importance of the local perspective is mirrored in the form of the volume, which is concluded by eight shorter pieces giving an individual, often non-academic point of view on the history and legacy of the Famine.
- 3 The second major preoccupation evidenced by this collection of essays also has to do with the location of the 2015 Great Famine Commemoration. Indeed, John Mitchel, the prominent Young Irelander responsible for the popularization of the Famine as genocide, was a Newry resident. Although it is the clear intent of the editors to link the two aspects of the Newry conference, it seems that the figure of Mitchel, who sought to exploit the Famine for nationalist purposes, resists, or escapes, a detailed and balanced study of the local impact of the disaster. Very early on in his article on "John Mitchel's town, its hinterland and the Great Famine", Anthony Russell has to acknowledge a failure to find a local relevance to Mitchel's writings: "[Mitchel's] descriptions of terminal destitution were penned not about the landscape surrounding Mitchel's home town, Newry, but rather they followed an electioneering visit in support of Young Ireland to Galway in 1847" (p. 47). James Quinn's engaging study of Mitchel's defence of slavery in The Southern states of the US at the time of the Civil War shows that there was no inherent contradiction between Mitchel's aggressive brand of Irish nationalism and a belief in the inferiority of Blacks, which was instrumental to the agrarian system of the South. Having derived from Thomas Carlyle the combination of anti-capitalism and racism, Mitchel blamed on the English both the Irish situation and the rise of capitalism, to which a Southern-style slave-based agrarian economy was the answer.
- 4 Despite a number of unnerving typos (notably in Anthony Russell's article), this is a stimulating volume that offers solid analyses of fresh material and new perspectives that underline the local dimension of recent Famine scholarship as a way to counter nationalist-based over-simplifications that have for long dominated popular perceptions of the Famine.

AUTHORS

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