

EMILY LAWLESS—*from:*

'FAMINE ROADS AND FAMINE MEMORIES'

(1898)

IT HAS SOMETIMES seemed to me as if every great event, especially if it be of the more tragic order, ought to have some distinctive cairn or monument of its own; some spot at which one could stand, as before a shrine, there to meditate upon it, and upon it alone. Such a shrine—though only in my own eminently private mental chapel—the great Irish Famine of 1846-47 possesses, and has possessed for more years than I can now readily reckon. Whenever I think of it there rises before me one particular spot, in one particular corner of Connemara; one particular cluster of cabins, or rather wrecks of cabins, for roofs there have been none since I knew it first. There they stand, those poor perishing memorials, and yearly the nettles spread a little further across their hearthstones, and yearly the slope on which they rest crumbles a little nearer to the sea, and yearly the rain batters them a little more down, and the green things cluster more closely around them, and so it will be till one day the walls too will roll over, and the bog from above will overtake them, and the last trace of what was once a populous village will have disappeared, without so much as a *Hic Jacet* to say where it stood.

Certain words and certain combinations of words seem to need an eminently local education in order adequately to appreciate them. These two words, 'Famine road,' are amongst the number. To other, larger minds than ours they are probably without any particular meaning or inwardness. To the home-staying Irishman or Irishwoman they mean only too much. To hear them casually uttered is to be penetrated by a sense of something at once familiar and terrible. The entire history of two of the most appalling years that any country has ever been called upon to pass through seems to be summed up, and compendiously packed into them.

Emily Lawless was born in 1845 as the devastating impact of the Great Famine was being felt across Ireland. She grew up in a wealthy landowning family in Lyons House, County Kildare, but spent many childhood summers with her mother's family in Tuam, County Galway. She is best remembered as the author of novels such as *Hurrish* (1886), which explored social conditions in rural Ireland in the run up to the First Home Rule Bill, and *Grania* (1892), a romance set on the Aran Islands. Another novel, *With Essex in Ireland* (1890), was widely acclaimed and admired by Gladstone for its fidelity to historical detail. Lawless was a pioneering figure of the Irish Revival who combined a deep interest in history and natural science with a literary sensibility. Her style is distinguished by a forensic attention to →

→ place, and to the fluid landscapes and weather so distinctive of the west of Ireland. Her influence on later Revivalist writers, notably J.M. Synge, is undeniable. In this essay written fifty years after the fact, Lawless feels the need to register the dark trauma of the Famine, and struggles to comprehend how such a catastrophe was allowed to happen. The abandoned cabins and buried Famine roads she encounters become shrines to the ghostly victims whose horrific deaths are narrated here in gothic detail. Such recent memories of the Famine may explain the fascination with ghosts and spirits so evident in the literature of the Revival, but they also account for the collective urgency to replace a period of death and torpor with one of renewal and revival.

Other mementoes of the Famine, besides its roads, exist of course in Ireland. As his train lounges through its flat central counties the intelligent stranger must have more than once observed some erratic looking obelisk, or other odd development of the art of the builder. If he bestirs himself to inquire what it is, he will be pretty certain to be told that it is a 'Famine work', as though bad architecture and empty stomachs had a natural connection! There are plenty of such abortive 'Famine works' scattered over the country, but the Famine roads were the official ones—the ones longest persisted in, and in the vast majority of cases, alas! they were the most absolutely futile and abortive of all.

If the Famine road has disappeared, however, other traces of the Famine, or rather of the pre-Famine condition of things, are still to be seen. Only if you have eyes to see them though and if the indications—worn almost to invisibility by this time—are sufficiently familiar to make themselves felt as you look around you. Turning towards the higher ground you can count a succession of small humps or projections along the top of the ridge. There is one with a gable end still visible to help the reckoning. Fifty years back those projections were all villages, or groups, at any rate, of from three to ten cabins. In those pre-Famine days the rural population throughout Ireland was all but incredibly dense. The fact that nearly four hundred thousand one-roomed cabins are stated by the Registrar General to have disappeared between the census before and after the Famine, is alone sufficiently indicative of the change. Of such one-roomed cabins these villages probably all consisted. They were apparently unconnected with one another, even by a 'bohereen', yet this now utterly vacant hillside must have hummed in those days with life,

and been as busy with its comings and goings as any village green.

The mere bald enumeration of the number of lives extinguished in this one county of Galway during those two years of famine is enough to make one ask oneself how any man or woman living there at the time retained his or her sanity. Many did not. The list of those, well above the reach of actual hunger, who broke down, mind and body alike, from mere pressure upon their vital forces; from pity, from a sense of unutterable horror, is greater than would be believed, or than has ever been set down in print. And can anybody reasonably wonder? Take the mere official reports; the report, for instance, of one county inspector in this very district, and you will find him speaking of a hundred and fifty bodies picked up by himself and his assistants along a single stretch of road. Multiply this fifty-fold, and ask yourself what that means?

And if upon the roadsides, what of the less easily attainable places? Think of the thousands of solitary cabins and sheilings high on the hillsides? Think of the little congeries of similar cabins, such as these whose wrecks lie around us here; of the groups collected round their hearths, so large at first, growing smaller and smaller day by day, until none were left to carry out the dead. Think of the eyes lifted to heaven here upon these very slopes on which we are today indolently strolling. Think of the separate hell gone through by each individual father and mother of all that starving multitude. And when all hope was over, when the bitter draught was almost drunk, the end had almost come, that end which must have been so welcome, because there were none left to live for, think of the lying down to watch the vanishing away of this familiar green landscape in the last grey mists of death. ■