

The Famine Museum Strokestown Park, County Roscommon

We visited the famine museum at Strokestown Park, former home of the Mahon family, on our way back from Galway. It was a sunny afternoon, the car park was quite full, but it seemed that only a trickle of visitors came to the famine museum, suggesting that the house and gardens (which we did not have time for) were a greater attraction. The museum is housed in the old stable block, which provides ten sizeable, well-lit rooms, each covering a different aspect of the famine. There is a lot of material, well chosen and well spaced out. It consists of artefacts, contemporary pictures and newspaper articles, interpretation panels and, most important, selected documents from the estate archive. The existence of this archive, which documents both the tenants' stories and the landlords' responses, may explain why the museum is at Strokestown rather than in some more accessible location where it would be open all the year round and might attract visitors in numbers more commensurate with the importance of the topic. The national significance of the famine is underlined by the fact that the museum was opened by the then President of Ireland, and has the current President as its patron. According to the "Look around Ireland" website¹ the preservation of the house and archive was almost accidental. By the seventies, with only one old lady from the Mahon family remaining, the estate had fallen into disrepair and was bought up for commercial development by a local garage and truck importer (Westward Group). It was only later that the new owners realised what it was they had acquired, at which point they decided to preserve the house and gardens as a record of 'Big house' life, and to make the archive the basis for the famine museum.

On the way to Strokestown we speculated on what we would find at the museum, what line the exhibition would take, whether it would represent the landlords and the English as straightforward villains, or whether it would be more concerned to understand than to blame. We had seen other exhibitions where the insights of the working-class history movement had been over-simplified, making it hard to see beyond the stark facts of social and economic inequality and injustice. We agreed that whatever might be said about the arrogance, indifference, selfishness and acquisitiveness of the landlords they were undoubtedly faced with an intractable and urgent problem on their estates - urgent not just for themselves but also for the population at large. Their personal failings, their class and national prejudices, and their instinct for self-preservation may have narrowed their vision and prevented them from implementing the right solutions, but many of them were trying, according to their lights, to find the best way out of a long-standing crisis.

The first of the ten rooms contains pictures and information about the Mahon family and the life in the big house - the phrase big house is indeed apt because it is a very large and imposing eighteenth century mansion. What I remember particularly from this section is a photograph of the family sitting on a terrace or patio. It must have been taken around 1900 because the last surviving member of the family, Olive Mahon who died in 1982, is shown as a small girl. The notes refer to the life of the big house as quite separate and divorced from the life of the common people, and say that there was some sort of tunnel which enabled the servants to go about their

¹ <http://www.lookaroundireland.com/roscommon/strokestown.php> (seen 27 June 2009)

business without being seen by the family and their guests. I don't know what to make of this explanation, nor whether the tunnel was in existence fifty years earlier. The family in the photograph gives an impression of unease, though again it's hard to know what this means, whether it was due to discomfort at being photographed or indicated some profounder sense of insecurity, a presentiment that as a family and as a class their time was almost up. It is a haunting image, a row of well-fed, arrogant, somewhat stupid, faces. It may be that their unease reflects late-Victorian insecurity, in which case it tells us less about the Mahons of two generations earlier, but their apparent weakness confirms my first impression of the house as we drove into the car-park – that it was too big. The families of the Ascendancy would declare themselves, perhaps sincerely, to be Irish, but nonetheless they were always settlers, occupiers, and their houses were built not only for display and convenience, but also to dominate and intimidate. This inherited role, was evidently uncomfortable for the late-Victorian Mahons; one wonders how it seemed to the mid-century generation which was confronted by the horrors of the famine.

The second and third rooms describe the situation of the agricultural poor before the potato famine. Two things in particular struck me. First I was surprised to learn that the potato-diet was, compared with the diet of the agricultural poor in some other countries, nutritious and healthy. An active man required an astonishing fourteen pounds of potatoes per day. An acre yielded six tons, enough to support two or three adults for a year, which meant that although the last month or so before the new harvest might often be a lean time, labourers with two or three acres could support their family. What they could not do was find the rent for their two or three acres. The information about the potato-diet was new to me; the information about the poverty of the Irish tenants was not new, except that the reality of poverty always comes as a shock to those of us who have not experienced it. Paddy McKye's Memorial makes you stop and gasp as it must have made those who first read it in the 1830s. Patrick McKye was the national schoolmaster in West Tullaghobegley in Gweedore, Donegal. He published a list of the total combined belongings of the 4000 inhabitants of the parish: one plough, one cart, 20 shovels, 32 rakes, 7 table forks, 93 chairs, 243 stools, two feather beds, eight chaff-beds, three turkeys, 27 geese, 3 watches, no looking glass above 3d in price and no more than ten square feet of glass altogether, and so on.² The implications of this pitiful inventory were simple: the people of the parish sat on the floor, slept on the floor and ate with their fingers; they could not cultivate their land effectively and if ever they had a surplus to sell they could not transport it to market.

The survival of the poor depended entirely on the potato and on the small plot of land on which to grow it. There were various forms of land-tenure, frequently complicated by the interposition of middlemen who did the dirty work for the big land-owners. I did not feel, after reading the various definitions of rundale, conacre and cottier, that I understood how things were supposed to work. Some of the land tenure was on the basis of work for the landlord rather than money rent, so I

² The BBC website ('A Short History of Ireland') has further information on the Memorial of Paddy McKye; it gives the number of people as 9,000 not 4,000. See <http://www.bbc.co.uk/northernireland/ashorthistory/archive/intro181.shtml> (seen 28 June 2009). The plight of the poor of Gweedore prompted Lord George Hill to look for alternative employment for the poor, and to try to promote the area as a tourist destination for the English.

couldn't see how, in such cases, the tenants could come to owe money, unless it was that the tenants refused to work or the landlords, not having enough work to go round, demanded a cash equivalent. But one way or another the simple fact was that people could not, under any system, pay their rent. Landlords, even so-called good landlords like Lord George Hill in Gweedore, resorted to eviction. When Major Denis Mahon inherited the Strokestown estate he found that arrears had built up over many years. His agent proposed a plan to restore the viability of the estate by helping the deserving poor, who were trying to pay their debts, and evicting the others. The deterrent that might have made a landlord hesitate to evict was the thought that he would have to support the evicted tenants in the workhouse through the poor rates. The solution favoured by the Mahon family was emigration. Offered a choice between emigration and the appalling conditions in the workhouse as described in the fourth room of the museum, the evicted tenant was in effect compelled to emigrate. Quite apart from the pain involved in separation from home and family, emigration was dangerous, with almost half the emigrants despatched under Mahon's scheme dying on the journey or soon after arrival.

Eviction and enforced emigration had begun the task of disposing of the rural poor before the potato blight came to devastate the land, and the process continued in the decades following the famine. In view of the suffering both of those who remained in Ireland and of those who ventured on the insanitary emigrant ships, the animosity against the landlords was only natural. Major Mahon was one of a number who were assassinated. Given the catastrophic decline in the Irish population over these years it is not surprising that there are accusations still of genocide and ethnic cleansing.

The museum does not endorse such accusations. Although it gives many examples of racist propaganda by the British, including vicious cartoons from the eighteenth and nineteenth century, and of the callousness of landlords pursuing their self-interest and politicians wedded to the theories of *laissez-faire*, it does not demonize. It does not disguise the practical and moral complexities of the situation. By giving subtle glimpses of latter day development issues it reminds us that these are problems which we have not yet solved. Only those who have abandoned the belief in private property can decently argue that Irish landlords should have given up all thought of collecting their rents. Enforced emigration was undoubtedly cruel, but progressive thinkers saw emigration, like the harsh logic of the Poor Laws, as necessary and salutary. To Dickens, for example, the New World offered a solution to the crisis in the cities. In a world turned upside down, our modern obsession with preventing immigration, with keeping the destitute at bay, is hardly different from the nineteenth century desire to get rid of the destitute through emigration.

Like the contemporary accounts in parliamentary enquiries and sanitary reports on urban slum-dwellers, McKye's Memorial records the complete absence of human decency and dignity, with children going naked, and whole families sleeping together on their makeshift beds. The museum, however, does not quote this part of the Memorial, perhaps because it recognises that it is a double-edged sword. By pointing to the sub-human conditions in which the poor live you run the risk of alienating rather than attracting sympathy. We come to think of those living in such conditions as being actually sub-human. This can take the crude form of likening them to animals, as when Lord John Russell argued against rewarding Irish tenants for improvements made to their holdings by saying 'one might as well compensate

rabbits for the burrows they have made'. It can also take subtler forms, as it does still, when we fail to believe that the mother in the refugee camp feels the loss of her child as we might feel it.

Coming away from the museum it was hard not to feel its immediate current relevance. The landowners wanted to evict their tenants not only because they were not paying rent, but also in order to put the land to more productive use, by introducing more rational, economically viable and scientifically advanced forms of farming – usually grazing by cows and sheep. In Africa and Asia today there are similar conflicts between traditional subsistence agriculture and cultivation of cash-crops or the building of dams. There may not be the same competition for land that there was in Ireland, but there is instead fierce competition for water, with the winner invariably being the moderniser. There are also aspects of the response to the crisis of the potato blight that are familiar from modern experience of disaster: bitter disputes over the causes of the blight, for example, and also an international response to what would now be called the 'humanitarian catastrophe', with donations from such disparate sources as the Ottoman Emperor³ and a group of native Americans. As so often nowadays, the initial intervention in the crisis was ineffectual, since the maize that the government imported from America for distribution to the hungry was virtually unusable because no-one had facilities for grinding it. Economic and social theories, then as now, delayed or prevented the provision of aid, with dispute as to whether it was right to export the food which no-one in Ireland could afford to buy, and to sponsor public works to enable the population to earn their relief.

We talk now of 'failed states' in the developing world, when a nation's political, social and economic institutions are incapable of responding to the challenges facing them; it seems plausible to say that by the 1840s centuries of foreign rule had reduced Ireland to just this position. In Britain the political system was stable enough to survive the upheaval, the repeal of the Corn Laws, that was precipitated by the crisis. In Ireland itself the disaster of the famine gave impetus to the tortuous process of political change. The Museum contains information in its last two rooms about the aftermath of the famine, the growth of both underground agitation and mainstream political campaigning for home rule. It also reminds us that it was the loss, through starvation and emigration, of the whole of the landless labouring class that speeded up the decline of the Irish language. The movement to preserve and restore the language was therefore not simply a romantic longing for some misty and long-dead past, but an attempt to repair one part of the damage done by the disaster of the famine.

I don't think the visit to the museum changed my mind about any of these matters. The things it told me were things which, at some level, I already knew. This is not to say that it had no effect upon me. It brought my knowledge to the surface, and sharpened my awareness of the events. What should one's attitude be to the crimes and disasters of the past? It is too late to feel pity or indignation for the family thrown out of their hovel to live in the ditch; too late to feel horror at the mass graves and the death ships. I am not going to feel guilt or shame as a British person for the crimes of the British political class of 160 years ago. For the historian I suppose one

³ There is a story (which I didn't see in the Museum and for which I know of no evidence) that the British government put diplomatic pressure on the Ottomans to persuade them to reduce their contribution so that it would be less than Queen Victoria's £2000.

lesson to learn is that there are limits to relativism. We can understand that people responded to the famine according to the limitations and presuppositions of their class and time, but this doesn't mean we can't make moral judgements. No doubt racial and religious prejudice against the Irish was pretty universal, but not everyone would express it and act upon it in quite the appalling way Lord John Russell did. For myself, I would hope that the experience of the museum, its representation of the horrors and of the way people reacted to them, will help to improve my moral antennae and make me more sensitive to harshness, indifference and prejudice in my responses to the horrors of our own time.

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