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**Reporting the Irish Famine in America:  
Images of 'Suffering Ireland' in the American Press, 1845-1848**

**James M. Farrell  
University of New Hampshire**

On April 17, 1847, a citizen of Boston, using the pseudonym "A North Ender" submitted a letter to the *Boston Bee* newspaper, expressing his "concern" about the increase of Irish immigrants in the city:

"Of the 3,000 paupers at present supported by this city, over 2000 are foreigners! and without taking into view this almost daily increasing burden by our 'spring ships,' there are more important and solemn considerations which are due our country in endeavouring to protect it from the baneful and deteriorating influence, which this mass of bigoted, ignorant, and vicious offscouring of Ireland and England, &c., must have upon our national character, our institutions, morals, &c. . . . our ill-directed 'national sympathies' for the improvident and vicious of other countries, is not only exposing us to the well merited ridicule of foreign nations, but is subjecting us to gross abuses and impositions [from the] motley groups of depraved, ignorant, and famished paupers, which from [Britain] the 'world's last hope,' is thrown almost daily upon our shores. . . . there is a stern duty we owe our own country in the protection of its political and religious liberty, its morals,

its general institutions, and the 'bone and sinew' of our land, the mechanic and laboring men, from the deadly influence of foreign imported pauperism"<sup>1</sup>

The uncharitable attitude of this letter writer was, sad to say, rather widely held by Americans in the wake of the early Famine migration to North American cities. And, while the social, ethnic, and religious differences between the “native” Americans and the arriving Irish certainly explain a measure of the anti-immigrant sentiment, these explanations are, I think, inadequate to account for the virulence of anti-Irish rhetoric, and the depth of emotion with which the prejudice against the Irish was felt during the Famine migration. In this chapter, I offer a close examination of the image of the Irish constructed from narratives of the Famine in American newspapers, and aim to reveal not only why Americans so aggressively opposed Irish immigration, but also why the language of that anti-Irish discourse was passionate to the point of hysteria.

Beginning in mid-1845, there was regular coverage of the Irish Famine in American newspapers. From these many press accounts of the Famine I have identified six master narratives that largely defined American newspaper coverage of the catastrophe. Together these narratives reveal how nineteenth-century Americans came to understand the Famine and its victims. These narratives, in other words, became the literary conventions employed to describe and analyze an event that both interested and frightened American readers. In particular, these narratives combined to create a portrait of the Irish that predisposed Americans to be passionately hostile toward Irish Famine immigrants. After months of reading

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<sup>1</sup> *Boston Bee*, 17 April 1847.

about the "suffering Irish," in narratives that often stripped Famine victims of humanity and dignity, and marked the Irish as physically and morally alien, Americans were conditioned to view the Irish as a population to be feared, hated, and isolated from the rest of the community.

In general, the journalistic narratives of the Famine grew out of, intersected broadly with, and largely reaffirmed the strong ideological foundations of American middle class nativism, capitalism, and Protestantism. The result was that American newspapers—daily and weekly, Whig and Democratic, secular and Christian—were remarkably uniform in their coverage of the Famine. This study of the stories about Ireland and the Irish will reveal how the American press struggled to accommodate the happenings of the Famine into the rich variety of themes, images, and narrative structures that contributed to the mid-nineteenth century American identity.<sup>2</sup>

### **Apprehension**

The potato blight first appeared in Ireland in September of 1845, but the alarming news was not reported in American papers right away. The *New Hampshire Sentinel* of 24 September contained a notice about the total failure of the potato crop in Belgium, from a disease "which begins at the leaves and gradually turns into corruption the whole plant,"<sup>3</sup> but other papers were still reporting, "the

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<sup>2</sup> In what follows, I will survey the various narrative motifs individually, with the understanding that the characteristics of more than one narrative might appear in a single story, and with the recognition that many of the themes in these narratives overlap and merge in their attempt to offer a comprehensive account of the Famine in Ireland.

<sup>3</sup> *New Hampshire Sentinel* 24 September 1845. Almost all the newspapers of the period were four-page publications, with a significant portion of column space devoted to advertising and official notices. I have refrained, then, from including

news from Ireland is not important.”<sup>4</sup> By early October, however, the first stories about a looming famine in Ireland appeared in the columns of American newspapers. “The disease among the potato crop seems to be universal,” reported the *Ohio Statesman*, and “in Ireland it forms the chief food of the people.” While some districts had “escaped the ravages of the disease,” the “injury is too wide spread not to cause alarm.”<sup>5</sup> During this earliest period of news from Ireland, there was, as yet, no famine on which to report. The prevailing theme was one of apprehension. Throughout Europe, reported one paper, “the potato crop is injured by disease generally, but in Ireland so as to threaten famine.”<sup>6</sup> Another warned that, “Famine, gaunt, horrible, destroying famine seems impending. Fears have seized the public mind. In Ireland matters look appalling—in England gloomy.”<sup>7</sup>

There were varying accounts about the extent and severity of the potato crop failure. Reports offered a range of scientific explanations for the blight, and some papers suggested adjustments in agricultural methods to prevent complete collapse of the crop. Other stories recommended changes in British economic and administrative policy as a way to avoid catastrophe. Some newspapers even emphasized that Ireland’s grief was America’s opportunity. While an actual famine remained an abstraction of the future, a considerable number of stories focused on

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page numbers, as most of the stories of Ireland and the Famine are easily found by identifying the section devoted to foreign news.

<sup>4</sup> *Barre Patriot*, 26 September 1845; *The Times Picayune*, 30 September 1845. Steamship traffic from Liverpool and Queenstown to an American port (usually Boston or New York via Halifax) normally took between 18 and 21 days, and thus news from Ireland is reported in America about three weeks after it occurs.

<sup>5</sup> *Tri-Weekly Ohio Statesman*, 8 October 1845.

<sup>6</sup> *Berkshire County Whig*, 27 November 1845.

<sup>7</sup> *Pittsfield Sun*, 27 November 1845.

the impact of the potato failure on the commodity exchange, emphasizing how the markets in Europe would be demanding American grain. The November 5<sup>th</sup> *Baltimore Sun*, for example, reported that, “the present state of things will give a powerful impetus to the feeling in favor of free trade, and rumors, even now are prevalent—mere conjectures, probably, but straws show how the wind blows—that Peel, ere long, will throw open the ports, and thus anticipate the famine which would appear to be impending over Ireland, and which cannot be unfelt in England.”<sup>8</sup> Likewise the *Boston Daily Atlas*, summarized the news from London by saying “the leading topics that have agitated the public mind are, the famine in Ireland—the opening of the ports, for the admission of foreign grain,” and “the probable repeal of the Corn Laws.” The paper made sure its readers understood that “the opening of the ports for the admission of foreign grain is of the greatest importance to commercial circles in the United States.”<sup>9</sup>

Still, the main attitude was one of foreboding as correspondents contemplated the human cost of the approaching famine. It was this fear of an imminent catastrophe that was the chief element of the earliest American news accounts of the Great Hunger. By early November, most papers were reporting that, “a failure of the Irish potato crop” was “now too painfully certain,” and “a famine among the Irish people is apprehended.”<sup>10</sup> According to the *Southern Patriot*, “There is now no part of the country that is not visited by the blight,” and “even allowing much for exaggerated alarm,” it was clear “the loss is tremendous.” Yet, “the worst

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<sup>8</sup> *Baltimore Sun*, 5 November, 1845.

<sup>9</sup> *Boston Daily Atlas* 24 November 1845.

<sup>10</sup> *Baltimore Sun*, 7 November 1845; *Barre Patriot*, 7 November 1845.

feature in the calamity is the uncertainty that still exists.”<sup>11</sup> The *Boston Daily Atlas* reported the “almost total failure of the potato crops,” and “the greatest alarm prevails.”<sup>12</sup> Implicit in these narratives of apprehension is an awareness of the specific conditions of Ireland that made the crop failure something worse than simply an agricultural setback. Knowing that in Ireland the vast majority of the peasant population relied on the potato as the primary food source led correspondents and editors to the obvious conclusion that, absent extraordinary measures, a potato blight almost certainly meant widespread starvation and death.<sup>13</sup>

Stories that emphasized anxieties about a pending disaster also tapped into a common fear among the American people, most of whom still lived in a farming economy, and whose collective identity was crafted from a shared agrarian past infused with traditional pastoral values. The trepidation and disquiet that arises upon contemplation of a complete crop failure thus deeply implicates the Irish people as a population in danger. Fear is the principal emotional response to the

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<sup>11</sup> *Southern Patriot* 25 November 1845. See also *New Hampshire Sentinel*, 26 November 1845.

<sup>12</sup> *Boston Daily Atlas*, 4 November 1845.

<sup>13</sup> This point is made clear by comparison of the stories about Ireland with stories in American newspapers from a year earlier that reported on the outbreak of the potato blight in the United States. Those stories, common between September and December 1844, remarked on the potato failure as a scientific mystery, an agricultural loss, and an economic setback, but never as a threatened human tragedy. While the “calamity” was one “of sufficient importance to claim the attention of scientific men,” (*New Hampshire Sentinel* 18 September 1844) it was nowhere reported as the precursor to a famine. For other stories on the 1844 potato blight in the United States, see for example: *Barre Gazette*, 20 September 1844; *Southern Patriot*, 27 September 1844; *Boston Daily Atlas*, 1 October 1844; *Vermont Gazette*, 8 October 1844; *Pittsfield Sun*, 10 October 1844; and *New York Herald*, 13 November 1844.

perception of imminent danger. By sympathetic identification Americans could imagine the growing panic of Irish peasants who saw their livelihoods and sustenance rotting away before their eyes. The danger is all the more pronounced when no basis for confidence—no alternative source of food, and no remedy from science or the government—was at hand to diminish the foreboding. The Irish people, then, are constructed as a helpless population in grave danger. “The fear of trans-Atlantic famine, or apprehension of scarcity, do not by any means appear to be feigned, as some have been led to suppose,” reported the *Baltimore Sun* in early December. “It seems to be an *impending* reality, which *may* or *may not* be averted.”<sup>14</sup> Using the words of a Dublin correspondent, the *Ohio Statesman* warned Americans that, “SIX MILLIONS OF HUMAN BEINGS in Ireland and England, are within *eight weeks of STARVATION!*”<sup>15</sup> Indeed, wrote another correspondent to a different newspaper, there was an “appalling prospect of a *horrible famine in Ireland.*”<sup>16</sup>

By early 1846, the apprehensions previously expressed had materialized in a catastrophe of great magnitude. The danger had arrived; what had, until then, been

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<sup>14</sup> *Baltimore Sun*, 8 December 1845, (italics in the original). Skepticism about the reports from Ireland of a pending famine was not uncommon. See for example, *The Boston Atlas* of 7 January 1846, and the item entitled “The Alleged Famine in Ireland” in the *Baltimore Sun*, 16 January 1846. The *Sun* later addressed the concerns about exaggeration directly. On 7 March 1846, quoting from the *London Times* of 6 February, they wrote: “There appears to be no longer a doubt that an almost universal famine is about to visit Ireland. Such is the dire reality which has been looming upon us through the midst of Irish rumor and English incredulity these four or five months, and which is now too distinct and too palpable to be any longer denied.” See also: *Southern Patriot*, 9 March 1846; *New Hampshire Sentinel*, 11 March 1846; *Wisconsin Democrat* 4 April 1846; *Farmer’s Cabinet* 25 June 1846.

<sup>15</sup> *Ohio Statesman*, 10 December 1845, (emphasis in the original).

<sup>16</sup> *Emancipator*, 7 January 1846, (italics in the original).



only feared, was now plainly at hand. No longer could readers hold on to the hope that, somehow, by the intervention of science, or by a change in policy or fortune, the crisis could be averted. What had been feared in the abstract now confronted Ireland, America, and the world as a desperate and certain calamity. By early March Americans were reading that, “Famine is raging in Ireland and consequently disease.”<sup>17</sup> According to the *Southern Patriot*, “the condition of Ireland is, morally and physically, deplorable. There is great destitution among the inhabitants of many districts—and disease growing out of scarcity of provisions and exposure, has already made its appearance.”<sup>18</sup> Some American newspapers printed accounts of Daniel O’Connell’s February speech in Parliament defending “his motion for an inquiry into the state of famine and disease in Ireland.” These accounts cited O’Connell’s evidence that exhibited “the alarming condition of the country under the present calamity.—Famine in Ireland was invariably accompanied by typhus fever; and this fact, with the population of five millions already on the verge of starvation, was of itself appalling.”<sup>19</sup> Other stories revealed additional consequences from the increasing scarcity of food. “The intelligence from Ireland is painfully distressing,” reported the *Boston Daily Atlas*. “In parts of Tipperary the peasantry, unable any longer to resist the cravings of hunger, have taken the cure in their own hands—plundered the provision shops, broken into flour mills, and helped themselves.” Indeed, the paper continued, “The town of Clonmell is in a state of siege. Troops are obliged to escort provisions as they pass through the streets, and the unfortunate

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<sup>17</sup> *Tri-Weekly Ohio Statesman*, 11 March 1846.

<sup>18</sup> *Southern Patriot*, 23 March 1846.

<sup>19</sup> *New Hampshire Sentinel*, 25 March 1846. See also, for example, *Boston Daily Atlas*, 19 March 1846.

creatures, whose bones are described as protruding through their skins, are only kept down by the fear of the bayonet.”<sup>20</sup>

### Visitation

Once it became clear that famine had indeed struck Ireland, newspapers in America sought to offer a deeper analysis of events. The period of apprehension had passed, but now the newspapers sought some way to go beyond simply reporting that, “Famine and fever continue to prevail to an alarming extent, in Ireland.” True, the reports were horrible, and the papers reminded Americans that “these accounts are not exaggerated,” still the stories offered little that helped Americans make sense of the catastrophe across the sea.<sup>21</sup> One of the ways that the newspapers struggled to explain the famine was to characterize the crisis as an “appalling visitation”<sup>22</sup> of God’s justice, or as a providential chastisement of “God smitten Ireland.”<sup>23</sup> In this narrative frame, the Famine is accounted for in theological terms, and the suffering of the Irish is explained as part of the inscrutable mystery of God’s providence. “The mysterious Providence of Almighty God,” reported the *Wisconsin Democrat*, “has deprived that great people of the principal article of its daily food.”<sup>24</sup> The *Connecticut Constitution* concluded, “it has pleased God in his inscrutable providence to afflict Ireland,”<sup>25</sup> yet, as the *Friends’ Review* explained, quoting Scripture, “O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God!

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<sup>20</sup> *Boston Daily Atlas*, 4 May 1846; *New Hampshire Sentinel* 4 May 1846.

<sup>21</sup> *Boston Daily Atlas*, 23 May 1846.

<sup>22</sup> *New York Tribune*, 12 February 1847.

<sup>23</sup> *New Hampshire Sentinel*, 10 February 1847.

<sup>24</sup> *Wisconsin Democrat*, 20 March 1847.

<sup>25</sup> *Constitution*, 24 February 1847.

How unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out!”<sup>26</sup> The editors of the *Christian Secretary* agreed. “The suffering which has been brought upon the poor of that down trodden country by the failure in the crop of a single article of food was designed, undoubtedly, by the Providence that directed it, for some wise and benevolent purpose: but it is not for us to determine what that purpose is.”<sup>27</sup>

This is a narrative of faith, drawing on the long tradition of American Protestant theology and identity. And, while it is not surprising to find this motif appearing in Christian publications across the United States, it also emerges in the secular press. Within the narrative, the Irish have no personal agency, but are acted upon by Divine Providence. The implication is, of course, that the Irish are being punished for their sins. Nor are readers encouraged to further investigate other causes, or inquire into the political and economic conditions of Ireland. Instead, readers are left to simply reflect on God’s mysterious ways. If there was any consideration of a cause it was tightly constrained by the theological frame of the narrative. For example, the *New York Evangelist* concluded that the Famine was God’s way of advancing the temperance cause. “The Providence of God has powerfully co-operated,” [in that cause] “by the visitation of a fearful scourge in teaching the lesson of temperance. In Ireland it is a grateful fact that temperance has greatly mitigated the evils of the famine.”<sup>28</sup>

Whether God’s purpose could be known or not, the suffering of the Irish is held up as a moral lesson for Americans, who are invited to contemplate that they

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<sup>26</sup> *Friends’ Review*, 6 November 1847. The quoted Scripture passage is Romans 11:33.

<sup>27</sup> *Christian Secretary*, 9 April 1847.

<sup>28</sup> *New York Evangelist*, 20 May 1847.

too, in God's good time, might be made the object of a similar chastisement. Indeed, this was the lesson conveyed by the editors of *The Christian Inquirer*:

"There is to-day, a great moral call upon the world's attention; I mean the cry of famine that has gone through the world. Yes, in this age of long peace and unexampled industry and overflowing abundance, a cry of famine has gone through the world; and communities, nations, pine for lack of bread. It is a most significant and startling intimation to the world of its weakness and dependence upon a Power above itself. . . . in lowliness must we bow before the great Ruler of the world, and feel that we are poor and helpless pensioners upon his bounty: that it is not in man that walketh, to direct his steps, nor in man that laboreth to provide his wants; that power is no protection, and wealth no defence; that the ship-fever coming from the far-off shore of famine-smitten Ireland, may strike down the noblest and the strongest among us."<sup>29</sup>

Another characteristic gesture of the visitation narrative is the personification of Famine as a destroying angel, or as the spectral instrument of God's justice. Such personification can be seen in the *Boston Transcript* story of October 3, 1846: "Famine, with its numerous and dreadful train of diseases, knocks at the doors of the great majority of [Ireland's] brave and hardy population. Already the cry has become universal 'give us food, that we perish not'."<sup>30</sup> In a similar way, another paper explained: "nor does famine march alone; the pestilence, in its most

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<sup>29</sup> *Christian Inquirer*, 3 July 1847. The Scripture passage is Jeremiah 10:33. See also Psalm 127:1.

<sup>30</sup> *Boston Transcript*, 3 October 1846. See Genesis 47:15.

loathsome form, follows close in the train."<sup>31</sup> American newspapers frequently employed such personifications to emphasize the extent and certainty of Irish suffering. "Famine and death, grim messengers of despair, stalk boldly forth with lion front, in their most hideous form, crushing all beneath the massive wheels of their mighty juggernaut car."<sup>32</sup> In another report, readers were encouraged to imagine "Gaunt famine, with raging fever at her heels, are marching through the length and breadth of the island."<sup>33</sup> As Sean Ryder has observed, such images borrow heavily from Gothic literary conventions, "the notion of the walking dead, the spectre army, the terror produced by violating the natural order."<sup>34</sup> But, for nineteenth-century Americans, it was the Biblical associations that resonated so powerfully among a people whose worldview was an expression of their distinctly Protestant identity.<sup>35</sup>

The visitation narratives tended not only to discourage interrogation of the political and economic relationship between Ireland and Great Britain, they also limited consideration of available remedies. The witness to providential visitation responds with characteristic resignation and awe. Divine punishment does not invite economic change or political revolution. If any response is invited, it is that of charity, as readers are reminded that the same God who smites Ireland has also blessed America abundantly. "Starvation and death is entering the homely

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<sup>31</sup> *Albion*, 20 February 1847.

<sup>32</sup> *Barre Patriot*, 12 February 1847.

<sup>33</sup> *Boston Times*, 23 April 1847.

<sup>34</sup> Sean Ryder, "Reading Lessons: Famine and the *Nation* 1845-1849," in Christopher Morash and Richard Hayes, eds., *Fearful Realities: New Perspectives on the Famine* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1996), 158.

<sup>35</sup> The personification of famine and pestilence draws on Biblical images familiar from 2 Samuel 24:15-17, and 1 Chronicles 21:9-13.

dwellings of the poor of the 'Green Isle,'" wrote the *Baltimore Sun*, "and it is only by the immediate and efficient aid of those whom a kind Providence has blessed with plenty that the monster famine can be expelled from their firesides."<sup>36</sup>

### **Charity**

This brings us to the stories about the charitable American response to the Famine, and the reports of American attempts at Irish Famine relief. Indeed, a significant portion of the American press coverage of the Irish Famine was not directly about Ireland or the Irish at all, but rather about American charitable efforts to ease Irish suffering. Americans were exceedingly generous to the Irish during the period of the Famine, and the newspapers were conscientious in reporting on the progress of relief efforts. Many of the stories were self-congratulatory, and no doubt gave Americans satisfaction that they were assisting in the relief of so much misery. The narratives largely confirmed the image Americans had of themselves as a Providentially blessed and Christian nation, quite in contrast to the image of an Ireland abandoned by God, and plagued by famine and disease.

Beginning as early as November of 1845, American papers called for charitable efforts to ease the suffering in Ireland. "The blight that has fallen upon the potatoe (sic) crop has taken their only food out the mouths of millions," wrote the *Baltimore Sun*, "leaving them no alternative but death by starvation, should relief from without not be extended to them."<sup>37</sup> As Americans responded to these calls, the newspapers reported on the relief efforts. The *Southern Patriot* (a newspaper from Charleston, South Carolina) reported on a relief meeting in Boston "to devise

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<sup>36</sup> *Baltimore Sun*, 26 November 1846.

<sup>37</sup> *Baltimore Sun* 27 November 1845.

means of extending aid to Ireland, now threatened by a famine, in consequence of the failure of her potatoe (sic) crop." The meeting included appeals and addresses by prominent citizens and "at the close of the speeches a subscription list was opened and upwards of six hundred dollars raised on the spot. Measures were then adopted to increase the fund."<sup>38</sup> By the following winter of 1846-47 Americans had responded to the crisis with an unprecedented amount of private charity for the "suffering Irish." Indeed, according to George Potter, aid to the Irish during the famine was "the first great nationwide free-will extension of American generosity and benevolence to other people bowed down under a natural catastrophe"<sup>39</sup>

Charity narratives consisted of two main themes. The first was the appeal to readers for assistance in relieving Irish suffering. The second was the reporting on charitable efforts that often including applause for those public officials who took the lead in relief meetings. A story in the *Trenton State Gazette* demonstrates the collaboration of these themes in portraying the generosity of Americans: "This evening the meeting called by the Mayor, for the purpose of raising money for the relief of the starving Irish, is to be held. We propose that this morning, and throughout the day, our readers should endeavor to realize the condition of the wretched sufferers. Information enough has been published and re-published, to put it out of the power of any to doubt, that all the charities we can send, will do good, and contribute to feed those who are dying for want of food."<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> *Southern Patriot* 18 December 1845.

<sup>39</sup> George Potter, *To the Golden Door: The Story of the Irish in Ireland and America* (Boston and Toronto: Little Brown, 1960), 454-55.

<sup>40</sup> *Trenton State Gazette*, 1 March 1847.

Other papers echoed the appeals to charity. The *Baltimore Sun* encouraged readers, exhorting them to continue their charitable efforts: “With the increase of destitution and the rigor of privation, active sympathy should keep pace, and effort be enlarged. The United States is an immense field of action, and more favorable than any other land for the successful exertions of benevolent enterprise. Here, domestic charity has erected countless monuments of its steady perseverance.”<sup>41</sup> Likewise, the *Barre Patriot* reminded readers that, “with us lies the power to diminish, to a great extent, the suffering which pervades the length and breadth of that land. Then arise! With all your boasted honor, virtue and goodness, ye sons and daughters of New England, and extend to them *now*, for now is the day, and now is the hour, the hand of mercy and benevolence, as hundreds and thousands are dying hourly and daily.”<sup>42</sup>

When Americans began to respond, the newspapers faithfully reported on the relief efforts. “The first step of the Committee,” reported the *Southern Patriot*, “was immediately to appoint Sub Committees in each Ward, to wait upon the citizens of their respective Wards, and solicit from them such aid, as in their liberality under the circumstances, they might be disposed to give. These Committees consist of the following gentlemen: . . . These committees are actively, and it is pleasing to relate, successfully engaged at work.”<sup>43</sup> The *Farmer’s Cabinet* also dutifully reported on relief efforts. “Subscriptions are going on in all quarters of

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<sup>41</sup> *Baltimore Sun*, 17 February 1847.

<sup>42</sup> *Barre Patriot*, 12 March 1847. See also *New York Herald*, 11 February 1847; *Wisconsin Democrat*, 22 May 1847; *United Brethren’s Missionary Intelligencer*, (annual) 1847.

<sup>43</sup> *Southern Patriot*, 17 February 1847.



the Union. There is scarcely a city or town in the country, that is not contributing something for the relief of the poor starving Irish and Scotch. Contributions are daily pouring in from city, village and hamlet. America will make a generous offering, on the altar of Christian sympathy . . . Small efforts are not to be despised in such a work as this; they are the little rills that go to make up the great streams of charity, that is now beginning to swell across the Atlantic to the shores of suffering Ireland."<sup>44</sup>

But the charity narratives, very common after February of 1847, continue to portray the Irish as helpless victims. Rarely did such stories of charity work include a reference to the Irish people without the adjective of "starving," or "suffering" or "unhappy," or "famishing." To be sure, the charity was indeed generous, and the appeals necessary to keep American readers active in their relief efforts. But, it is also the case that such narratives perpetuated a view of the Irish as forsaken and dependent. While they were perhaps a worthy focus of benevolence while suffering in Ireland, they could easily become a drain on the public treasury when planted among a prosperous people. Thus the common images constructed by the charity narratives prepare Americans for the often much less charitable response made to the Famine immigrants that began shortly to arrive on their wharves and streets.

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<sup>44</sup> *Farmer's Cabinet*, 4 March 1847. See also: *Boston Evening Transcript*, 18 February 1847; and *Charleston Mercury*, 27 May 1847. Boston papers, in particular, also gave extensive coverage to the voyage of the *Jamestown*, and the gratitude of the Irish for the relief sent in that vessel by the citizens of Boston. See for example the *Boston Daily Times*, 6 May 1847; *Boston Evening Transcript*, 7 May 1847, and 8 May 1847. An account of the *Jamestown* voyage is contained in Edward Laxton, *The Famine Ships: The Irish Exodus to America* (New York: Holt, 1998), 49-60.

## Blame

When we turn to consider the fourth of the master narratives, the narratives of blame, we find a broad collection of disparate theories and explanations. And, each attempt to assign blame implies a different solution for addressing the Famine crisis. Narratives that focused on attributing blame for the famine are united, not by the details of the accounts they offered, but rather by the desire of writers and readers to make sense of, and come to terms with, this horrifying event across the Atlantic. It is also the case that the causes one chose in explaining the origins of the Famine often revealed more about the politics of American newspapers and readers than they did about any truly useful theory of the Famine's origins. In all cases, however, the Irish themselves are diminished in dignity, as either lacking in essential virtues, or as victims of some other force beyond their control. Apart from the commonplace narratives of Providential visitation already addressed above, three prominent themes make up the bulk of the narratives of blame: The British Government is to blame. The Irish people themselves are to blame. The Catholic religion is to blame.

### The British Government:

From the earliest reports of the impending famine, some American papers held the British government responsible, if not for the potato rot itself, at least for failure to respond with adequate measures to avert catastrophe. "Is this, then, the determination of the British government?" asked the *New Hampshire Sentinel*. "Seven millions of people, or, at least, the great majority, the whole of the lower classes, 'live habitually in scarcity—in what would elsewhere be thought famine,'

and are threatened with absolute want and starvation, while enormous duties are permitted to remain upon all kinds of grain; and the only suggestion in their behalf is an appeal to charity!" How is it, the paper wanted to know, that "the government can do nothing, although there is a duty on wheat of eighteen shillings per quarter, and on other grain in proportion, standing directly in the way of the poor man's bread!"<sup>45</sup> Analyzing the matter more deeply, the *Berkshire Whig* thought the source of Ireland's problems could be traced to the system imposed by its colonial masters. "Press the whole population of the United States into Massachusetts; let the title to the soil in that State be in some ten thousand persons, and despite the most perfect form of government on earth, Massachusetts would be a land of famine and murder; millions would be absolutely at the mercy of the few landholders . . . In Ireland, ten times the food consumed by the people is raised. It is sent out of the country and converted into rent."<sup>46</sup>

"What are the causes of distress in Ireland?" asked the *Georgia Telegraph*. The editors were inclined to agree with Archbishop Hughes of New York, who in his lecture on the causes of the famine cited "'1<sup>st</sup>, incompleteness of conquest; 2d, bad government; 3d, a defective or vicious system of social economy.'" The *Telegraph* continued, saying the Archbishop "denies that this is a visitation of God, and so do we. It is a visitation of men."<sup>47</sup> The *New London Morning News* also asked, "What is the real cause of this wretchedness?" To them, the answer was clear: "The evil is not strictly a national destitution of food, but the prices are so exorbitant, and the

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<sup>45</sup> *New Hampshire Sentinel*, 30 December 1845.

<sup>46</sup> *Berkshire Whig*, 16 April 1846.

<sup>47</sup> *Georgia Telegraph*, 20 April 1847.

laborer's means so scanty, that he is unable to buy. Her nobility and her merchants are surrounded with their usual possession of good things, and the same short harvest which proves the destruction of the laborer, is an additional means of wealth to the land-holder and speculator . . . And the speculator only improves a means of personal wealth sanctioned by his Government! *The wealth of aristocracy, and the destitution and wretchedness of the laborer, are alike legal, and both the legitimate offspring of the social arrangement of Great Britain.*"<sup>48</sup>

In a similar way, the New Orleans *Times Picayune* affirmed that the origins of the Famine are to be found in the fact that "The British Government has confiscated nearly every acre of land on that beautiful island from the original native owners, and has bestowed them on favorites, generally non-resident foreigners."<sup>49</sup> The *Wisconsin Democrat* agreed. "One million of souls, gone to a happier world, we trust, where there are no non-resident landlords to plunder; and no government to aid and assist them in plundering. But though the victims may be better off, it would seem that a just God must deal vengeance upon those who have caused this awful havock and desolation."<sup>50</sup>

To hold Great Britain responsible in this way reassured many American readers. They could be confident that even with a massive crop failure a similar catastrophe was unlikely to strike them for no other reason than the fact that, unlike the unfortunate Irish, Americans had thrown off British rule. The people of the

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<sup>48</sup> *New London Morning News*, 5 March 1847, (italics in the original).

<sup>49</sup> *Times Picayune*, 26 August 1848.

<sup>50</sup> *Wisconsin Democrat*, 1 May 1847. See also *Boston Emancipator*, 6 January 1846; *Catholic Telegraph*, 2 April 1846; *New Englander*, April 1847; *National Era*, 6 May 1847.

United States were not plagued by a landed aristocracy, nor exploited by absentee landlords. Their farms were their own, and the produce of the land remained in the hands of the yeoman farmers who raised it. At the same time, these narratives that blamed Great Britain reinforced a view of the Irish as dependent, oppressed, exploited, weak, and unlikely to possess the virtues and political sensibilities most commonly exhibited by American citizens. Such considerations, then, would have made many Americans suspicious about the political competence of Famine immigrants arriving in America, and defensive against the corrosive influence of the Irish on American republican institutions.

The Irish Themselves:

Other papers and their readers saw the matter differently. They blamed the Irish themselves, in their character and behavior. "It is certain that the Irish poor are sadly destitute," wrote the *Farmer's Cabinet*. "And it is equally certain, that if the mass of Irish emigrants to this country were placed by themselves in the most fertile region in America, if as much land were given to them as they were disposed to cultivate, if left to themselves, they would be as poor, and as much exposed to famine as they are now, unless their character and their habits became essentially changed. There is something quite incomprehensible in the Irish character. Foresight, provident calculation, the spirit of improvement, those elements of New England character, seem scarcely to enter it all."<sup>51</sup> A similar chord was struck by the *Saturday Rambler*: "the Irish people seem to have given themselves up to despair,

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<sup>51</sup> *Farmer's Cabinet*, 4 March 1847.

and are making no preparation for the next season. Agriculture seems about to be abandoned. There seems to be a total neglect of tillage."<sup>52</sup>

To another paper, it was "Bad government and whiskey [that] have made Ireland what she is. Make her the recipient of the world's charity, yet suffer the causes of her ruin to remain, and her miserable population will continue the unrelieved, unimproved and profitless consumer of potatoes and bread."<sup>53</sup> "The News from Ireland is painful," the *Boston Transcript* reported, "The misery of the people is increased by their own conduct. The peasantry are haggling about their wages on the public works, and demanding higher wages from the government than they received from private individuals."<sup>54</sup>

These narratives of blame drew upon on stereotypes of the Irish as feckless, violent, lazy, savage, primitive, or otherwise uncivilized. In particular, the Irish were ignorant, superstitious drunks. "Indulgence in intoxicating drinks has been the cause of a very great proportion of this suffering," wrote the *New Hampshire Sentinel*. Intemperance keeps "the poor depressed, and reckless of the future.— Even now grain which might feed tens of thousands is daily converted into whiskey."<sup>55</sup> Evidence of the defects of the Irish character could be seen especially in the reports of agrarian violence that sometimes accompanied accounts of starvation and disease. "The country is in a frightful state of disorder," reported the *Baltimore Sun*. "Murder succeeds murder," and Irish peasants "attack poor-houses," and plunder the flocks of landlords. "The mass consists, not of paupers and famine-

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<sup>52</sup> *Saturday Rambler*, 27 February 1847.

<sup>53</sup> *Barre Patriot*, 26 March 1847. See also the *Wisconsin Democrat*, 26 June 1847.

<sup>54</sup> *Boston Transcript*, 13 November 1846.

<sup>55</sup> *New Hampshire Sentinel*, 8 April 1847.

stricken wretches, but of strong hale young fellows, having no employment. The object is to deter from rents and rates.”<sup>56</sup> Another paper reported that “bakers' shops are still broken into by mobs, and bread is carried off. Sheep are stolen from fields, and carts with corn and flour, are stopped and emptied of their contents. Murders, in some counties, at noon day, are frequent, and are committed upon unoffending persons.”<sup>57</sup> The *Ohio Statesman*, too, described Ireland as “again the scene of agrarian outrage and murder,” and of “illegal combinations which have been formed to resist the payment of rent.”<sup>58</sup> Peasants have “attacked and demolished soup-kitchens, thus depriving others of their sole means of existence.” There has been, wrote the *New Hampshire Sentinel*, “a system of outrage and intimidation,” such that “it has been found necessary to keep the military and police in constant requisition.”<sup>59</sup>

#### The Catholic Church:

By far, the most common narrative of blame was that aimed at Catholicism. The famine was the work of “an ignorant priesthood,”<sup>60</sup> and Americans should feel sorry for the suffering of the “many poor Papists,”<sup>61</sup> who have been “ridden, and kept in ignorance by the priesthood.”<sup>62</sup> “The starvation, sufferings, and crimes which prevail among four millions in Ireland,” proclaimed the *Christian Observer*,

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<sup>56</sup> *Baltimore Sun*, 12 November 1847.

<sup>57</sup> *Boston Atlas*, 18 November 1846.

<sup>58</sup> *Ohio Statesman*, 11 November 1847.

<sup>59</sup> *New Hampshire Sentinel*, 10 June 1847. See also *Boston Atlas*, 11 November 1846, and 7 December 1846.

<sup>60</sup> *New York Tribune*, 19 February 1847.

<sup>61</sup> *Christian Advocate, and Journal* 20 December 1849.

<sup>62</sup> *Zion's Herald and Wesleyan Journal*, 14 April 1847.

“are the legitimate fruits of Popery.”<sup>63</sup> To understand the cause of the Famine, explained the *Friends’ Review*, we need only examine “the difference which exists between Episcopalian England, Presbyterian Scotland and Popish Ireland.” Who can make such examination “and not immediately perceive the origin of the woes of the last named country?” To be sure their readers understood, the *Review* announced clearly, “It is the priests who have made the Irish what they are; or rather it is a degrading religion which has debased alike priest and people.”<sup>64</sup> The *Farmer’s Cabinet* editorialized about the necessity of finding “vigilant agents” who could distribute American charity in Ireland, “to see that these benefactions are not put into the hands of popish priests.” An Irishman, wrote the editors, “would take the bread out of his living children’s mouths to pay for masses for the soul of a dead child. The curse of Ireland,” they concluded, “is her popish priesthood.”<sup>65</sup>

We find within all these narratives of blame descriptions of the Irish that were especially powerful to an intensely anti-Catholic, Anglo-protestant readership educated to value industry, self-discipline, moral and intellectual virtues, community spirit, independent religion, and public order. These images of the Irish, in other words, contrasted sharply with the images many Americans had of themselves, and gave grounds to fear the disorder and foreign influences that would attend a vast influx of Irish into their community.

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<sup>63</sup> *Christian Observer*, 8 January 1848.

<sup>64</sup> *Friends’ Review*, 22 December 1849.

<sup>65</sup> *Farmer’s Cabinet*, 4 March 1847. See also *The Independent*, 7 June 1849.



## Morbidity

Most of what I call morbidity narratives presented graphic descriptions of starvation, disease, and death, and were by far the most common image of the Irish people occupying the newspapers of America in the winter and spring of 1847. In December 1846, the *Boston Atlas* wrote about a man on the public works who collapsed and died of starvation. "On the day of his death--Saturday the 24th October--the steward gave him a piece of bread; and, in the act of putting it to his mouth, he sank and died! The two physicians swore that such an instance of starvation they never before met with. He was so attenuated from want of food, that all the fatty substance of the system was totally absorbed and gone."<sup>66</sup> Typical of the morbidity narrative is this one from the *Barre Patriot*:

"A day ago I entered a miserable cabin, dug out of the bog; a poor woman sat propped against the wall inside; the stench was intolerable, and on my complaining of it the mother pointed to a sort of square bed in the corner; it contained the putrid—the absolutely melted away remains of her eldest son. . . . These are not fancied sketches, neither are they ideal pictures, but painful realities; and who is there that will not shudder at their truths?"<sup>67</sup>

A similar account appeared in the *New Hampshire Gazette*, a first-hand report that had originally been printed by the *Cork Examiner*:

"We this day witnessed a most horrifying and appalling spectacle at the Shandon guard-house, at the foot of Mallow lane. Under the sheds attached to that building lay some thirty-eight human-beings—old and young men,

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<sup>66</sup> *Boston Atlas*, 7 December 1846.

<sup>67</sup> *Barre Patriot*, 12 March 1847.

women, children and infants of the tenderest age—all huddled together, like so many pigs or dogs, on the ground, without any other covering but the rags on their persons, and these in the last stage of filth and hideousness.—There they lay—some dying—some dead—all gaunt and yellow, and hideous with famine and disease. We have seen many sights of horror within the last month, but never anything equal to this congregated mass of human debasement. The smell that came from the unfortunates was offensive in the extreme, and was sufficient of itself to propagate disease.”<sup>68</sup>

Not only the vivid depiction of starving bodies, but also graphic images of those suffering from disease and its effects were part of the portrayal of the Irish absorbed by American newspaper readers. "Typhus fever, of a malignant character, rages," reported the *Boston Transcript* "and also a disease—for which we know no term, but of equally fatal consequences—has made its appearance. It attacks the lips first, which fester, and then the stomach, somewhat similar to English cholera; so much so, that we have heard of a great number of persons having fallen victim to this latter disease." <sup>69</sup>

The morbidity narratives are marked by a detailed focus on the physical pathology of starvation victims, and are often motivated by an impulse of scientific curiosity. The narratives seem to depend on the reader's morbid fascination with

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<sup>68</sup> *New Hampshire Gazette*, 25 May 1847. See also *Christian Observer*, 29 January 1847; *Baltimore Sun*, 30 January 1847; *Trenton State Gazette*, 8 February 1847; *Morning News*, 12 February 1847; *New London Morning News*, 17 February 1847; *Wisconsin Democrat*, 23 March 1847; *Pennsylvania Freeman*, 25 March 1847; *Emancipator*, 31 March 1847; *National Era*, 1 April 1847; and *Constitution*, 11 August 1847.

<sup>69</sup> *Boston Evening Transcript*, 2 February 1847.

the slow process of death by hunger and related diseases. The morbidity narratives enlisted all the senses of the reader in an effort to induce an imaginative encounter with the suffering of the Irish. These narratives function figuratively as metonymy insofar as they reduce the abstract idea of a national famine to the graphic and particular representation of what Elizabeth Clark has called, “the gruesome tribulations of the body.”<sup>70</sup> The vividly described deterioration of the body becomes the material evidence for the absence of food. The unseen process of starvation is physicalized in the agony of Famine victims. The response to such an account is pity. Readers, by sympathetic imagination, would be encouraged to place themselves in the scene, and identify with the suffering victim. At the same time, the pathos of vivid description kept near at hand the abiding fears of readers who were forced to confront their own mortality and consider their own vulnerability to starvation and disease. In this way, then, the graphic accounts of extreme suffering were instrumental in motivating charitable efforts across America.

Another characteristic of the morbidity narratives is the frequent reliance on the “trope of indescribability.”<sup>71</sup> As graphic as were the descriptions of starving bodies, correspondents often confessed their incapacity to capture the horror they witnessed, or to describe the extent of the suffering throughout the regions they visited. “Description is futile to convey any notion of the suffering in Ireland,” we read in the *Baltimore Sun*, “but some idea may be had from individual facts.”<sup>72</sup> In

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<sup>70</sup> Clark was referring to writing about American slavery. See Elizabeth Clark, “‘The Sacred Rights of the Weak’: Pain, Sympathy, and the Culture of Individual Rights in Antebellum America,” *Journal of American History* 82 (1995): 465.

<sup>71</sup> See Ryder, “Reading Lessons,” 161.

<sup>72</sup> *Baltimore Sun*, 25 February 1847.

another account printed in the *Boston Evening Transcript*, readers are prepared to learn about “scenes of frightful hunger.” As the writer, Nicholas Cummins, entered the cabins of Famine victims in Skibbereen, he found scenes “such as no tongue or pen can convey the slightest idea of. In the first, six famished and ghastly skeletons, to all appearance dead, were huddled in a corner on some filthy straw, their sole covering what seemed a ragged horse cloth, their wretched legs hanging about naked above the knees. I approached with horror, and found by a low moaning they were alive.—They were in fever, four children, a woman, and what had once been a man. It is impossible to go through the detail.” Cummins struggles to find words that adequately communicate the horror he witnessed, and his rhetorical struggle itself becomes a measure of the dreadful reality he experienced. “It is impossible to go through the details, suffice to say, that in a few minutes I was surrounded by at least 200 of such phantoms, such frightful spectres as no words can describe. By far the greater number were delirious, either from famine or fever. Their demonic yells are still yelling in my ears, and their horrible images (are) fixed upon my brain. My heart sickens at the recital, but I must go on.”<sup>73</sup>

Finally, the writers of the first-hand accounts printed in American newspapers frequently aim to assure readers about the veracity of their testimony. They emphasize in various ways that their description is authentic, and includes no exaggeration or embellishment. As unbelievable as it may appear to incredulous readers, these accounts are, in the words of American statesman Henry Clay, “no

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<sup>73</sup> “A Scene of Wretchedness,” *Boston Evening Transcript*, 29 January 1847. The account by Cummins, from a letter he sent to the Duke of Wellington, is among the most well known testimonies of the gruesome effects of the Famine, along with the reports of Dr. Daniel Donovan, and those of Rev. Elihu Burritt.

fancy picture; but if we are to credit the terrible accounts which reach us from that theatre of misery and wretchedness, is one of daily occurrence."<sup>74</sup>

These morbidity narratives "naturalized" the famine as a physical, medical, or scientific reality. Yet this must have been unsettling, for such stories also demonstrated the inability of British science and medicine to cope with the catastrophe. While the graphic descriptions of dying people and even of rotting or rat-eaten corpses, implicitly further subordinate social, political, or economic meanings of the Famine, they may have also strengthened the idea of "famine and pestilence" as God's judgment. Americans may have been reassured by the belief that the Irish, suffering from a medical crisis beyond the reach of the modern science, must indeed be enduring a divine punishment. The detailed physical description of the Irish, then, becomes one way for Americans to ritually mark the morally corrupt alien, and so confirm part of the self-identity of the community. Those vivid account of physical suffering prepared Americans to engage in the physical exclusion of the Irish immigrants who would soon arrive in America.

### **Immigration**

During the Summer of 1847, amidst some optimistic reports of improving crops, and suffering themselves from what we might call today, "compassion fatigue," Americans mostly stopped paying attention to the Famine, which with varying degrees of severity continued for three more years. At the end of July, 1847, the *Boston Transcript* assured readers that in Ireland, "The weather continued favorable, and there is scarcely room to doubt an abundant harvest. Even the potato

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<sup>74</sup> "Speech of Henry Clay at New Orleans," as reported in the *Hudson River Chronicle*, 23 February 1847.

appears to be very generally healthy, and to promise bountifully"<sup>75</sup> In August, the *New York Tribune* reported that after a season of famine, "The prospects of the Harvest still continue unexceptionally encouraging, and everywhere promise a most abundant yield. Harvesting has already been begun in some of the Southern Counties. The crops of Wheat, Oats, and barley are universally healthy; the Potato, notwithstanding all that has been said about the reappearance of the disease of last year, is affected but to a very insignificant extent."<sup>76</sup> Following such reports, the Famine faded from view as an important story, and seldom again engaged the imaginations, or aroused the sympathy of American newspaper readers, who instead became occupied with the immigrants the Famine had transplanted to their shores.<sup>77</sup> The final master narrative, then, consisted of stories about Famine emigration first to England, then to Canada, and then to America. The narratives generally reveal a harsh picture of the American "welcome" for the Irish, and reflect, in their portrayal of the arriving Irish, the result of so many degrading pictures of suffering Irish carried earlier in the same pages.

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<sup>75</sup> *Boston Transcript*, 31 July 1847.

<sup>76</sup> "General Intelligence," *New York Tribune*, 19 August, 1847. See also *Weekly Ohio State Journal*, 4 June 1847; *Trenton State Gazette*, 20 August 1847; *Southern Patriot*, 23 August 1847.

<sup>77</sup> To gather data on the waning interest in the Famine as a news story, I searched the database of "America's Historical Newspapers" using the terms "Ireland" and "Famine." In the period of 1 January 1845 to 31 December 1847, there were 691 articles returned, of which 351, more than half, were published between January and August 1847, (more than half of those, 179, appeared between January and March 1847, a national rate of publication for that period of almost two stories per day). From September 1, 1847 to the end of that year, there were only 67 articles on the Famine, a national rate of publication that had dropped to about one story every two days. For the entire year of 1848, there were 176 articles on the Irish Famine, continuing the publication rate of roughly one story every two days. In 1849, the number of stories dropped to 104 for the entire year.

In January 1847, the first such stories appeared and depicted the scenes in English cities as Irish refugees fled starvation. "Immense numbers of poor half-starved creatures find their way across the channel, and beg and exist as best they can, by appeals to the feelings of the inhabitants in the great towns of England," the *New London Morning News* reported. "The number of these poor creatures in Liverpool, Manchester, and the manufacturing districts, natives of the sister country, who have fled from the wretchedness of their homes, is adding seriously to the local taxation of the places named"<sup>78</sup>

Two weeks later, the *Georgia Telegraph* reported that, "Day after day are the details of wretchedness and suffering laid before the public through the medium of the Irish journals. Liverpool has a practical proof of these statements. Her charitable finances have been swallowed up of late in awarding temporary relief to the innumerable number of Irish paupers who frequent the port."<sup>79</sup> It got worse. "Fever, introduced by Irish emigrants, is said to be prevailing extensively in the English towns near the Irish coast," reported the *Emancipator*. "Liverpool is suffering severely from the effects of this emigration; 200,000 Irish are reported to have landed in that city within the past year, filling the city with paupers, the hospitals and temporary sheds erected for the purpose, with the diseased and dying, and burdening the city with heavy taxation."<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> *New London Morning News*, 26 January 1847. See also *Boston Evening Transcript*, 25 January 1847.

<sup>79</sup> *Georgia Telegraph*, 9 February 1847.

<sup>80</sup> *Emancipator*, 9 June 1847.

The *Farmer's Cabinet* described Ireland as “the world’s great pauper-breeding establishment.”<sup>81</sup> When it became clear that many of the Irish Famine refugees were headed for America, the paper asked, “Are we prepared to have these hoards of Irish paupers become citizens on touching our soil, to be employed as the tools of priests and demagogues, in carrying our elections?”<sup>82</sup>

Reports also came from Canada: “The tide of pauper emigration pouring into our country [by] this Northern channel is incredible, and certainly alarming. The average number of Irish people daily landed at the Quarantine of the city, during the last month, is one thousand. They arrive here in miserable plight, and while a portion of them only stop here to die, the remainder are immediately shipped like wild animals to the United States.”<sup>83</sup> Another alarming report from north of the border appeared in the *Trenton State Gazette*:

“Every hour furnishes some new instance of sickness, or some fresh example of its termination by death, among those we know and respect. With whatever point the stream of misery comes in contact, it leaves the mark of its passage: on the steamboats, ten, fifteen, twenty, or five-and-twenty depart in the short voyage of one night between Quebec and Montreal. The mortality does not cease while the disembarkation is proceeding, and in the street the public find the bodies of those who die there, rather than go to the place which Government has provided, as if to secure an effective reservoir of contagion. In that hell upon earth, between one and two thousand sick

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<sup>81</sup> *Farmer's Cabinet*, 4 March 1847.

<sup>82</sup> *Farmer's Cabinet*, 1 April 1847.

<sup>83</sup> *New Hampshire Sentinel*, 1 July 1847.



fever patients, are constantly lying, and deaths to the number of thirty, forty, fifty, and even more than fifty take place nightly."<sup>84</sup>

American readers knew that thousands of these famine emigrants were headed for American shores and cities. When one immigrant ship arrived in February, *The Boston Bee* reported the scene. "The poor creatures, nearly naked, or clothed only in rags, were huddled together in the smallest space possible; and it appeared as if none of the filth, accumulated during the passage, had been removed. The stench that issued thence almost prostrated the visitor at the entrance, and yet cooped up in this noisome place, were several sick persons, and, in one bunk with her four children, was a poor woman, apparently just dying."<sup>85</sup>

All understood the implicit threat. "The influx of pauper Immigrants in squalid condition, diseased and destitute, is giving rise to serious concern in New York and Boston," reported the *Trenton State Gazette*.<sup>86</sup> An editorial in the *New York Sun* explained the concern. "Let it once be understood that all the paupers are emigrating to America, and we may bid adieu to the emigration of those industrious and enterprising foreigners who have hitherto flocked to our shores in multitudes. By emptying their poor-houses and jails upon us, the European monarchies accomplish four objects. They make emigration to America infamous among the better classes of their subjects; they corrupt us by sending their criminals here; they

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<sup>84</sup> *Trenton State Gazette*, 19 July 1847.

<sup>85</sup> *Boston Bee*, 20 February 1847.

<sup>86</sup> *Trenton State Gazette*, 10 June 1847.

reduce our resources by increasing our taxes for the support of the poor; and lastly, they get rid of the responsibility of supporting alms-houses and prisons"<sup>87</sup>

But the immigrants kept coming, and throughout the spring the papers continued to cover the arrival of the Famine Irish:

"Not only are our Alms houses and Hospitals crowded with the poor and sick who are daily flocking to our shores, but our streets are also swarming with them, and in almost every part of the city we see groups of these poor wretches, sick and feeble, resting their weary and emaciated limbs at the corners of the streets and on the door steps of both private and public houses, exciting commiseration, and, at the same time, the disgust of all who see them"<sup>88</sup>

A week later, the same paper reported that

"Vessels are continually arriving here with vast multitudes of miserable human beings, from famine-stricken Ireland, who were both physically and morally enfeebled before commencing a voyage which disease tracks across the ocean with an unerring certainty. Complaints are made that the ship fever is by no means confined to the emigrant vessels, but that it appears on shore, clinging to the Irish emigrant, and breaking him down farther in the country, after he has escaped from the confinement of a ship hold. . . . Hence cases are perpetually occurring in public institutions where foreign paupers

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<sup>87</sup> Reprinted in the *Boston Bee*, 9 January 1847.

<sup>88</sup> *Boston Evening Transcript*, 10 June 1847.

are admitted, and in narrow streets, and old decaying tenements where emigrants congregate on reaching the city."<sup>89</sup>

Still another report announced that "the tide of immigration which is increasing daily to a most alarming extent, bringing with it its necessary concomitant, poverty, sickness, and crime, has excited as it ought, the attention of the whole community, and the people in all parts of the country have at last become aroused, and are turning about to devise means to check an evil which has reached such a height that the very vitality of our country has become endangered by it."<sup>90</sup>

Consistent with the premises established in the other Famine narratives, Irish immigrants were viewed as bringing disease and moral corruption to America, and threatening the economy and political vitality of the nation. Those narratives that reported on Irish immigration consistently depicted the Irish as swarms, or flocks, of impoverished and diseased foreign creatures invading, polluting, and plaguing American cities. These stories and characterizations, almost entirely hostile toward the Irish, grow directly out of the predispositions formed by the other narratives of the Famine. That is, the images of the Irish composed over months of coverage of the Famine by American papers finally result in a response to the Irish immigrant that expresses the fears, hatred, and disgust of the Irish that Americans had been conditioned to feel. In the end, the Irish were depicted as an alien threat to the long established identity and values of the Anglo-Protestant that so powerfully held sway among readers of 19th-century American newspapers.

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<sup>89</sup> *Boston Evening Transcript*, 21 June 1847.

<sup>90</sup> *Boston Evening Transcript*, 26 June 1847.