

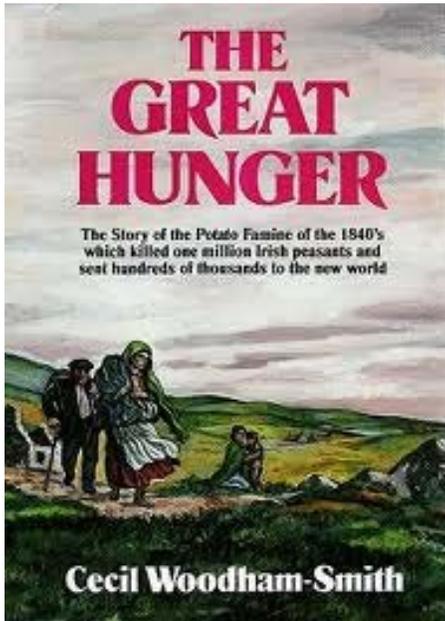
# Murder Unlimited

By Frank O'Connor

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THE GREAT HUNGER: Ireland (1845-9) by Cecil Woodham-Smith.

**I**t would be interesting to know what inspired Miss Woodham-Smith, who is the author of two of the finest books on early Victorian England, to write this history of the Irish Famine. Some analogy must have been present to her mind between the extermination of the Jews by Hitler's Government and the extermination of the Irish by Lord John Russell's [Prime Minister, 1846-1852]. I had read only a few of the conscientious memoranda of Sir Charles Edward Trevelyan [Assistant



Treasurer & Famine Relief Administrator 1840-1859] when I began to be troubled by an impression that I had read something like them in another connection. It was some hours later when the name flashed across my mind – Eichmann! [Adolf Eichmann, Nazi SS leader, organizer of Holocaust, executed 1962] Is it, perhaps, supreme tact on the author's part that she does not mention the same, and, when the moment comes, drops the nasty word "genocide" only to dismiss it? It is as though Miss Woodham-Smith were aware of more sinister interpretations than she can admit – interpretations that need not the cool piety of the historian but the maddened poetry of some Biblical prophet?

This is a book about racialism that leaves the problem of racialism untouched. For reasons which the author cannot explain, and which, perhaps, no civilized human being could explain, a majority of Englishmen hated the Irish as a majority of Germans hated the Jews, and would not oppose a policy of extermination. Miss Woodham-Smith quotes Jowett [Benjamin Jowett, Master of Balliol College, Oxford] as saying of a conversation with Nassau Senior [leading economist at Oxford, government adviser, 1845]: "I have always felt a certain horror of political economists since I heard one of them say that he feared the famine in Ireland would not kill more than a million people, and that would scarcely be enough to do much good." But why bring political economy into it? Nassau Senior would scarcely have said it about *English* peasants. English peasants were good, *Irish* peasants bad.

**“The great evil with which we have to contend,” wrote Trevelyan, “is not the physical evil of the famine but the moral evil of the selfish, perverse and turbulent character of the people.” God Himself had noticed it, for had He not made sure that the harbours in the starving West would not accommodate foodships? “It shows Providence never intended Ireland to be a great nation,” wrote Sir Randolph Routh [Relief Commission, 1846], and Trevelyan almost wept at the fact that the starving millions were not informed of it by their clergy. “It is hard upon the poor people that they should be deprived of knowing that they are suffering from an affliction of God’s providence.” One reads, and gasps, and asks oneself again whether Trevelyan, Wood and Routh were devils or merely madmen.**

**None of the whys and wherefores of the Famine can be rationally explained: it was merely the culminating point in a campaign of frightfulness that had been going on for hundreds of years—what else is “The Deserted Village” about? [Oliver Goldsmith’s 1760 poem about demolition of an ancient village and destruction of its farms to clear land to become a wealthy man’s garden] – and would have happened if the potato had never failed. Long before the Famine, America was flooded with illiterate, destitute Irish—“White Niggers” as the Negroes called them. The failure of the potato was an effect, not cause. “Because the landholder sees, we can live and work hard on ’em, he grinds us down in our wages, and then despises us because we are ignorant and ragged,” as one young labourer said to Asenath Nicholson, the American evangelist [traveler, Ireland 1844-46].**

**Nor can one explain the extermination policy on any psychological grounds I can think of. That the Irish were Catholic and the English Protestant is the most fantastic of all, and I wish historians would drop it. The truth is that the Irish were never given the opportunity of becoming Protestants, nor could they have been given it. From Elizabeth’s day onward it was perfectly plain to real Protestants that the whole country would be converted through its own language. Swift recommended it to the Government of his time. Even in Asenath Nicholson’s it is perfectly plain that the issue was still in doubt. Though she knew no Irish, she was welcomed wherever she went. Except, of course, by Protestants, for though you could have Protestantism or a Protestant Ascendancy, you could not have both. What the Ascendancy wanted was not converts but intimidated Catholics who would chatter “we do not worship images” for eight pence a day. His problem, Peel [Robert Peel, Prime Minister 1841-1846] said, was “peaceably governing seven millions of people and maintaining intact the Protestant Church Establishment for the religious instruction of sad consolation of one million. *Great and comprehensive interests, apart from those immediately connected with religion, are involved with the maintenance of that establishment.*” What those interests were we know: those that Clarendon [Lord lieutenant of Ireland for Queen Victoria] described as “misgovernment and mismanagement.” The poor English ate bread, the poor Irish potatoes; the potato failed in both countries and the poor English needed more bread. Should the poor Irish eat their own bread or should they die? We need hardly ask, What, after all, is racialism for? The poor Irish died.**

**For one of my generation this is not an easy book to read. I remember my grandmother's stories of what she saw round Cork Harbour when she was a girl; Petrie's description of how Ireland, the most music-loving country in Western Europe, suddenly fell silent almost overnight [George Petrie, collector of Irish music and antiquities, 1851]; as tAthair Peadar's of the kindly young couple he knew, who—separated in Macroom workhouse—heard of the death of their two children and decided to die at home themselves. He describes in a way that has haunted me since I was sixteen, how the young couple—the wife dying of typhus—went to weep at the famine pit where their children had been dumped, walked the six miles back to their little cabin, and were found next day by the neighbours, the dead wife's feet inside the dead husband's shirt to warm them until the end. [Ó Laoghaire, An tAthair Peadar--Fr. Peter O'Leary, Cork writer 1839-1920].**

**You will find nothing like this in Miss Woodham-Smith's immensely valuable book. She, no doubt, will forgive me if I fail to respond to the view of Sir Charles Eichmann-Trevelyan on the subject. I prefer [John] Mitchel's Carlylean eloquence, [*God sent the blight; the British sent the Famine*] in *The Last Conquest of Ireland, 1861*, Scawen Blunt's cold fury [English poet 1840-1922], the pathos of the American famine song, "Over there"—over Lady [Jane Francesca] Wilde's now unpopular but how moving? —rhetoric—*Nerve and muscle, heart and brain, Lost to Ireland, lost in vain.* [in poem: *The Exodus, 1864*]**