‘Death stripped of all dignity’
Rituals before & during the Famine

The Aran Fisherman’s Drowned Child
Frederick William Burton, 1841
National Gallery of Ireland

Although a romantic image, it is well-observed and tells much about the costume, traditions, customs and folklore and folklife of pre-Famine Connaught, especially the tradition and rituals surrounding death.

Funeral at Skibbereen
The body of a young man is laid on a cart; a second man whips the horse into action; a third stands by with a spade; onlookers gossip and argue: this well-observed scene shows us death stripped of all dignity.
Illustrated London News, x, 184
The Aran Fisherman’s Drowned Child
Frederick William Burton, 1841, National Gallery of Ireland
See page 4 below for an assessment of the value of the painting as source for the study of the past.

Treatment of death
The subject of death is an emotional one, and the picture centres around the tragedy that has afflicted these seafaring people. It shows the interior of a Galway fisherman’s cottage, filled by the crowd of peasants who have hurried in on hearing the calamity that has fallen on the house.

The dead child, wearing a white flannel frock known as the còta cabhlach, lies across the lap of the tense mother, searching its face for some sign of life. Still as a marble statue, stands the unhappy father, looking out from the picture, ‘too deeply moved for sound or movement, yet with that in his face that tells of the wrench his heart endures’.

Death, resulting from hunger, fever or disease was particularly common among poor people, and became an accepted part of the way of life, acquiring many traditions and rituals.

Unforeseen or sudden death in the young was judged unnatural and was attributed to the fairies. A drowning was considered an unnatural death, and in parts of Ireland it was customary not to bring the body of a drowned child into the house but to ‘wake’ it elsewhere. People were superstitious about drownings, and in many areas it was thought that the body should not be recovered as the ‘sea had claimed its own’. If the child was baptised, the wake would begin immediately and last two days and nights. An unbaptised child would be buried in unconsecrated ground - cillini - such as a field or a fairy fort.

1. In The Aran Fisherman’s Drowned Child, the distracted mother clings to her child while an elderly woman leans over as if to take the infant from her so that the wake can begin. The child appears to be about three or four years old, and it is not clear if it is a boy or a girl.

2. Already the keening is in evidence, begun by a woman who raises her arms in a gesture of sorrow and begins the low-toned lamentation known as caoineadh for the dead child.

In The Aran Fisherman’s Drowned Child, one woman has begun the lamentation, while the three women entering the doorway, all of whom are wearing similar cloaks, are probably going to assist.

The tradition of keening was not performed for everyone; it was generally done for people from the community and of some standing. It was customary to hire a professional keener to wail and cry over the dead. The usual number of keepers was four. One would stay near the head, one would remain at the feet, one took care of the candles, and the other would stand at one side of the corpse. The bean caointe, the keening woman, would cry over the corpse, composing improvised verse praising the dead child and expressing grief at its demise.

This ritual was seen as a symbol of the voyage of the deceased to an afterlife consisting of a mixture of Christian and ancient Celtic/fairy worlds.

3. Due to the unnatural death, the activities of the ‘borekeen’ or cleasai, the male jester who would organise the wake games, were severely curtailed.

Merry lively wakes were normal throughout Ireland when death was expected. Fairy abduction was a traditional way of reconciling accidental or unexpected death, and the merrymaking activities of the borekeen would reaffirm life and restore social order. The games at the wake and the keening are descended from the same ultimate source as the cliche caointeach game of lamentation - which took place when a great warrior died in Ireland.

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Funeral at Skibbereen
Illustrated London News, x, 184
See page 8 below for an assessment of the value of the illustrations in the Illustrated London News as evidence.

Spectre of death during the Famine
The spectre of death was brought very forcefully to the attention of the readership [of the Illustrated London News] ... both by the written text and the illustrations [of] the realities of the horrifying deaths common in every community. Details of the scale and conditions of interment of corpses, described ... in a January edition of 1847, would seem almost a preparation for an illustration in a later issue: ‘In the parish of Kilmore [Skibbereen], fourteen died on Sunday; three of these were buried in coffins, eleven were buried without other covering than the rags they wore when alive.’

A few weeks later the paper carried a heading, ‘Mortality in Skibbereen’ [giving] graphic details of disease and high mortality. The illustration, with its caption ‘Funeral at Skibbereen’, was intended to shock Victorian England.

The focus of attention was the cadaver of a young man being transported to his grave coffinless. Other, more conventional, funeral scenes also appeared. While many died in the workhouse, many more died along the roadsides and in ditches... more people died from disease than from starvation [but] in some districts deaths from starvation were high.

The reporter for the paper noted that:

all sympathy between the living and the dead seems completely out of the question; ... I certainly saw from 150 to 180 funerals of victims to the want of food, the whole number attended by not more than 50 persons; and so hardened are the men regularly employed in the removal of the dead from the workhouse, that I saw one of them with four coffins in a car, driving to the churchyard, sitting upon one of the said coffins, and smoking with much apparent enjoyment.
Social life in pre-Famine Ireland - art as evidence

1. The Aran Fisherman's Drowned Child as a visual document
Paintings can be important to an understanding of pre-Famine, most sources of evidence, such as government enquiries, say little about such aspects of society as the standard of living and the physical appearance of the country.

As a society Connemara produced little in the way of written records. Historians have to rely upon the comments of outsiders, such as travellers, and artists who chose to record the landscape and social life of Connacht in paintings, drawings and watercolours.

Frederic William Burton’s The Aran Fisherman’s Drowned Child (1841) is a watercolour on paper. Like all sources of evidence it has to be subjected to tests for bias. However, when the artistic framework is understood and comparisons are made with the available documentary and oral evidence, the painting provides a visual document illuminating the social fabric of pre-Famine Connacht

The Aran Fisherman’s Drowned Child shows what a simple and comfortable self-sufficient lifestyle these people led. It is particularly helpful in representing costume, traditions and customs, folklore and folklife. All were central to the environment in which the watercolour was produced, yet about which traditional historical sources are often very unsatisfactory.

2. The picture
The subject of death is an emotional one, and the picture centres around the tragedy that has afflicted these seafaring people.

It shows the interior of a Galway fisherman’s cottage, filled by the crowd of peasants who have hurried in on hearing the calamity that has fallen on the house.

The dead child lies across the lap of the tense mother, searching its face for some sign of life. Still as a marble statue, stands the unhappy father, looking out from the picture, ‘too deeply moved for sound or movement, yet with that in his face that tells of the wrench his heart endures’.

Mother, father and child are surrounded by friends and neighbours who have come to sympathise and mourn.

The poses of the women seem quite natural considering the tragic circumstances - ‘homely and touching native expressions’.

The setting is probably the Claddagh area of Galway rather than Aran Island.

3. Costumes
General appearance
The costumes of the people are shabby when compared to their well-fed appearance. These costumes were worn throughout the nineteenth century, were uninfluenced by fashion, and depended on the availability of local resources and fabric. Along the west coast of Ireland, ‘the deep red and blue tints of the female costumes were relieved by the azure dresses of the men.’

Women
  1. Countrywomen in the nineteenth century generally wore a skirt and blouse or bodice.

  The skirt or petticoat was made of flannel, in red, black or dark blue, and also of ‘dragger’, which was a mixture of wool and linen. It often contained four to five metres of material, had insets of calico at the waist and was worn calf-length. The skirt was worn over a linen shift, and on top was a high-necked buttoned bodice called the corpin.

  2. In The Aran Fisherman’s Drowned Child, women can be seen wearing hooded cloaks.
These were made of broadcloth by a travelling tailor, were valued possessions and lasted a lifetime. The Halls commented favourably on them in 1824: ‘the material falls well and folds well.’ The red and blue cloaks seen in the picture were expensive items, which tended to be handed down from one generation to another.

3. Large shawls gradually replaced cloaks. The shoulder shawl was crossed over the front and tucked into the waistband. The women in the picture wear plain and patterned shawls in addition to small headscarves tied under the chin.

4. Plain and striped aprons can be seen on several of the women, tucked up at the waist and exposing the petticoat.

5. Knitting, which can be seen on the floor, was not introduced to Ireland until the seventeenth century. The mother was probably knitting either grey socks or stockings called máirtíní or lóipíní, which provided a small income for women.

Máirtíní were knee-length soleless stockings; one part covered the heel and the other part had a loop which wound around the middle toe. They were worn by women and boys to protect the shins from cracking, caused by wet work outside or exposure to the fire indoors.

6. Girls and young women wore their hair loose or tied back, but as can be seen in the picture, as soon as they began to wear skirts and bodices, they pinned their hair up in a bun.

**Men**

The fisherman

1. The separation of the central figure, the Aran fisherman, is emphasised not only by his posture but also by his colourful costume, such as the red cravat and the jacket. The blue jacket with its brass or silver buttons is similar to a sailor’s costume, while it is also local to Connemara and the Claddagh area of Galway, where the men were renowned for their seafaring abilities.

2. The tall hat known as ‘The Caroline’ was worn throughout Ireland and differed from the wide-brimmed felt hat worn by the islanders.

3. The wide loose trousers of blue frieze was worn with pamphooties and a white bánín jacket.

4. Pamphooties’ were heelless single-piece shoes made from raw cowhide. Simple to make, the ‘pamphootie’ was functional and cheap and lasted about a month. The shoe was laced over the toe, around the heel, and tied about the instep with fishing line. They were normally souked overnight in water to keep them supple. A person wearing ‘pamphooties’ was characterised by a dignified bearing that came from walking on the toes and not on the heels like city folk. Shoes of this kind dated back to Early Christian times, when they were commonly worn in Ireland.

The grandfather

1. His overcoat was derived from an eighteenth-century riding coat. Known as the ‘swallowtail’, it was commonly worn by farmers in the early nineteenth century.

2. In the picture it is worn with knee breeches and pamphooties, although it might have been more customary to wear shoes called ‘brogues’.

3. Brogues were the everyday footwear of the common people, as distinct from the more modern ‘shoe’. Shoes cost more than brogues and were worn on special occasions.

The sailor

In the background of the picture, the sailor wears a blue hat with a chequered headband, similar to the ‘Tam o’ Shanter’ they made on the Aran Islands.

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Children
Children were dressed in a similar style to their mothers until about the age of twelve years. The custom of dressing young boys as girls survived throughout much of the nineteenth century.

Tradition says that this was done to deceive the ‘good people’, the fairies, as to the sex of the child. Having unattractive offspring, the fairies were reputed to steal young children, especially boys, and replace them with one of their own changelings.

There was a high infant mortality rate in Ireland in the nineteenth century. Many infants died very young and were buried in unconsecrated ground.

1. In the picture, the small barefooted child clinging to the grandfather wears a cotton sleeveless petticoat.

2. The dead child wears a white flannel frock known as the cóta cabhlach.

4. The dwelling
One room
1. The scene in the picture appears to be taking place in a one-roomed dwelling of the type used by 40 per cent of the Irish population at that time.

2. The roof would have been thatched with rye straw.

3. The kitchen was the core of the Irish home, where traditionally a fire was kept burning as a sign of hospitality and of the continuity of life. The size of the kitchen seems unusually large, even for a mainland dwelling.

While Sir William Wilde wrote generally about an Irish kitchen ‘always lighted up by a blazing turf fire’, Synge’s graphic description fits this kitchen: ‘The walls have been toned by the turf smoke to a soft brown that blends with the grey earth colour of the floor.’

Furniture and furnishings
The furniture was simple and basic, and consisted of fireside stools, forms and benches.

1. The grandfather sits on a four-legged stool.

2. The mother is seated on what is possibly a settle-bed, which was a seat by day and converted to a bed by night.

3. About the fire is a ‘crane’, a horizontal beam with hooks attached to it that was used for holding kettles and cooking pots.

4. A cast-iron three-legged cooking pot called a ‘skillet’, which is full of potatoes, can be seen hanging from the crane.

This fixture was movable and made cooking easier for the woman of the house.

5. To one side of the hearth a woman rests herself, while over her head there appears to be a keep-hole set into the wall. The keep-hole in this picture seems to contain bread or salt, both of which needed a warm place to keep them dry.

Most dwellings had a keep-hole, also known as poll an bpáirc, into which rosary beads and small items like tobacco, tea, knitting and a pipe were put.

6. A dark boat-shaped vessel can be seen above the keep-hole, and this is probably a primitive oil lamp called an slige, meaning a ‘grissee’ or a ‘cresset’.

The lamp contained fish oil, seal oil or tallow, and the rush lights burned in it provided sparse light, while the
fumes escaped through the smoke hole in the roof.

7. In the foreground of the picture behind the seated woman, is a conical-shaped basket, a food-carrying basket of the type commonly used on the Aran Islands.

5. Occupations
Fishing
The Claddagh, the likely location of the painting, boasted the largest fishing fleet in Ireland. Many kinds of fish and fishing nets can be seen hanging from the rafters of the house.

1. The fishing nets were made from cotton, imported from Spain, while the thick cord holding the cork floats was grass rope. The nets were used for drift-net fishing, carried out by night from currachs.

2. The mackerel or herring caught in the summer were for winter use and were cured by being put in a barrel of salt and water and hung out to dry and smoke.

Salted fish was in great demand in the nineteenth century as a supplement to the potato diet. If this was an Aran Island dwelling, one would have expected to see long fishing lines, used by the islanders to catch fish such as ling, sole or pollock.

Sailing
Through the doorway are the masts of a Galway Hooker. It was the most commonly used sailing craft in Connemara in the nineteenth century and it dated to around 1800. It was a strong, sturdy boat, with a single mast on which traditionally a cross was marked. The boat had dark sails and was a familiar sight plying between Aran and Galway, carrying livestock and turf from Connemara.

6. Beliefs
St Brigid’s Cross
The Brigid’s Cross has been placed above the door to prevent evil spirits entering the house.

The cross was notable because it was simply made from two peeled sticks or thin slips of wood which were tied together, while at the junction plaited straw or rushes were bound to hold it firmly.

St Brigid’s Day, 1 February, was the first of four quarterly feasts of the Folk Calendar. While each festival had its own distinctive customs and beliefs, St Brigid’s Day signalled the beginning of spring, when the fisherman and the farmer hoped the weather would improve. One custom associated with the holy day was the placing of a cross above the doorway; it was possible to tell the age of a house from the number of crosses in the rafters. The St Brigid’s Cross protected the house from harm or fire. The cross in this picture is of a Latin type commonly found along the west coast, on the Aran Islands and in Galway.

7. Death
See page 2 above.
The Famine & The Illustrated London News - illustrations as evidence

How far do the pictures published in The Illustrated London News in the 1840s provide us with an accurate contemporary record of the Famine crisis?

It goes without saying that they were not intended to be a statistical record of the events, but did they succeed in capturing the atmosphere of despair and hopelessness?

The value of the illustrations from this perspective varies considerably.

Those pictures emphasising scenic beauty, such as The Mall and Mall House, Youghal, a scene of the Late Food Riots ignore the suffering endured during the crisis, as does The Cork Society of Friend’s Soup House.

By contrast, other illustrations which can be matched to written evidence do evince the air of desolation that enveloped the country. Many of the sketches were done ‘on location’, a point very carefully noted by the paper, and the personal experience that the artists had of the suffering population gave a realism to many of their sketches. In one issue of the paper, the artist assured the readership that ‘the objects of which I send you Sketches are not sought after I do not go out of my way to find them’. The conditions under which one drawing of the starving man, Mullins, breathing his last was done, left such a deep impression that the artist described the event in detail.

The power of image is most strongly illustrated in three sketches, the Woman Begging in Clonakilty, Boy and Girl at Cahera, and Bridget O’Donnell and her Children. The human suffering is given strength through facial expression, ragged clothing and limited detail.

By contrast, in the eviction illustrations the skill, detail and intricacy of the artwork detract from the drama and despair of the episodes, and so require more careful study to reveal all the activity and emotion of the scenes. As Rabb and Brown in Art and History point out, ‘some pictures have to work hard to convince . . . while others achieve their aims with consummate ease’.

The fact that most of the ‘Famine’ pictures were accompanied by emotive text conditioned the response of readers to the visual image. Had they appeared in isolation, their impact on the viewer might have been less. Take, for example, the anatomical sturdiness of the individuals portrayed in many of the pictures. But for the accompanying text, the reader might well gain the impression that the Irish crisis was not severe, but merely a temporary problem with food supply, whereas we know from the written documentation that this was not so.