

complexity of the actual past, so too might one discern in “Canadianité” a transcendental ideal of tolerance and reconciliation that can also pre-empt critique and turn history into a comfortable discourse of consolation. Projected onto the past, this pacific notion of a Canada founded upon the mediation of structural conflicts and the transmogrification of dissonance into melody imposes its own kind of “fatality” upon the past. It is the fatality of liberal order, whose definitions of reality, algebra of passive counter-revolution, and hegemonic “handling” of contradiction are here naturalized and removed from any conceivable critique. This, too, is a myth-symbol complex, part of the new, post-1970, Toronto-centred liberal nationalism, with its tell-tale “terms of endearment” and its by now very familiar rallying cries (fluidity! ambiguity! difference!).

This is a thought-provoking book, from one of the subtlest minds to explore the possibility of writing history under conditions of postmodernity. Beyond “Canadianité” and “post-nationalism” one finds in its pages many highly suggestive comments about the possibility of historical knowledge, even under conditions of postmodernity.

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Cormac O'Grada — *Black '47 and Beyond: The Great Irish Famine in History, Economy, and Memory*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000. Pp. 302.

Cormac O'Grada is widely reckoned as the ranking economic historian of Ireland, and rightly so. In addition to technical virtuosity, he does something few economic historians are capable of: he writes well and with passion. This is the best book to come out of the recent “Commemoration” of the Great Irish Famine, and it should be understood in historiographic perspective.

Given the horrific magnitude of the Famine, it has until recently had a very thin literature. Professional historians avoided it because of its immense scale and because it had become yet another bead in the rosary of Irish nationalist hate-rhetoric. It is much too important for that. In the immediate aftermath of the Famine, the reaction, both of its survivors and its observers, was one of silence. It was too big to comprehend. The break in the wall of silence was John Mitchel's *The Last Conquest of Ireland (Perhaps)* (1860), which turned Ireland's greatest tragedy into a conspiracy: England starved Ireland. Everything written since then exists in the shadow of this massively successful novel. “The Almighty sent the potato blight, but the English created the Famine” (p. 219). It is a clear story, in black and white. It is well to remember, however, that John Mitchel spent a good portion of his life as a propaganda master of the American Confederacy. Having spent time as a very privileged “rebel” prisoner in Tasmania, he escaped to the United States in 1853. In New York he published a newspaper, *The Irish Citizen*, and then, as a strong supporter of slavery, he moved to the South. “I consider Negro slavery the best state of existence for the Negro” was his view. That mind-set produced his work on the Famine: he saw everything in black and white.

The gripping yarn that Mitchel proposed was the subtext for Cecil Woodham-Smith's *The Great Hunger* (1962), which many sources say is the best-selling non-fiction book in the English language, ever. Against this, the professional historians had no chance; as Patrick O'Farrell, the great Irish-Australian historian, explained, Mitchel's formulation had unrivalled *artistic* advantages. All Woodham-Smith had to do was to follow Mitchel's formulation of (as O'Farrell says) "vivid, gall-dripping anecdotes, the deadly irony of contrasts between the wealthy and the starving, between the late, paltry or often idiotic attempts at relief and the reality of rotting corpses". Thus, the only attempt by Irish historians to deal sympathetically and systematically with the Famine — R. D. Edwards and T. D. Williams, eds., *The Great Famine. Studies in Irish History* (1956) — was surmounted by the Mitchel and Woodham-Smith exercise.

In response to the Grand Guignol of this propaganda, it became the academic fashion during the 1970s and 1980s to play down the Famine as just another hic-cough in the cycle of European mortality crises. This swing of the pendulum was given force by the Famine (and every other bad thing that ever happened in Ireland) being used as part of the justification for terrorism in Northern Ireland, as elsewhere. To be against murder, it seemed, one had to forget about the victims of the Famine. Obviously, this was not an historical judgement, but a political one.

When the time came for the "Commemoration" (what a cynical truth is found in that word) of the Famine in 1995 and thereafter, it was also the time for the historical literature to swing back the other way. The years from 1994 to 1999 produced some of the worst history written in recent years concerning Ireland: exploitative Famine porn. Publishers vied with each other to turn out the most gut-wrenching details of people who died with their guts wrenching: John Mitchel, rewritten by small talents.

That is why Cormac O'Grada's work is so important. He does not write "balanced" history in the sense of finding the mean between two erring streams, but instead does it on his own, and gets it right, in his own write. He shows that one can be on top of rigorous scholarship, and can care deeply about the Famine victims, and still not be a hate-merchant.

First, O'Grada makes it clear that the Famine was not just a big deal, but a very big deal. He has an amazing comparative range, and he shows that the Irish loss of one-eighth of the population makes the modern famines in Ethiopia and Biafra modest in comparison. The closest thing we have in documented history is the starvation in the Soviet Union in 1918–1922, in terms of proportionate lives lost in the population. Secondly, O'Grada forces us to put everything in another perspective: incomes per capita in Great Britain (excluding Ireland) in the Famine era were somewhat below those of Indonesia or Egypt today. There was a lot less to spare than there is today. Thirdly, he argues that the term "genocide" (as is decreed, for example, by the New York State Board of Education) is completely wrong. It is encouraging to see an economist admit that people died, not because of Imperialism (ugly as that was), but because of the ideology of free market economics. The Irish Famine can be taken as the ultimate case of Margaret Thatcher's or Mike Harris's economics, taken to their logical extreme.

What makes this book so compelling is not merely that O'Grada is able to play quantitative evidentiary games with a sophistication far beyond that of traditional historians, but that he cares for the people concerned and, as part of that concern, is willing to deal with qualitative evidence. Fluent in the Irish language, he uses material from the Irish Folklore Commission, not just to illustrate his points, but as an independent source of probative material.

What is wrong with this book? Nothing. It stands virtuous on its own terms. I would like in future to see someone deal with the Famine as an ecological event and to do so without becoming enmeshed in the silliness of arguments for and against neo-Malthusian demographics. Whoever does that, however, will need a kevlar suit.

We owe Cormac O'Grada a great debt for his scholarship — but, then, I suspect he would say that he was merely repaying a debt to some people, long dead, whom he loved.

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Joy Parr — *Domestic Goods: The Material, the Moral, and the Economic in the Postwar Years*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999. Pp. 368.

This is an original effort by a talented writer to bring aspects of material culture to the forefront of historical scholarship. It will be of interest to historians, social anthropologists, and museum professionals. In her study of “modern Canadian material culture”, Joy Parr sets out to “consider both the technologies and aesthetics which influenced the physical form of things, and the economic and social ideologies which organized thinking about them” (p. 3). In four convincing chapters dealing with the political economy, she analyses approaches to spending and credit for industrial and household projects by government economic planners, manufacturers, and consumers from about 1940 to 1970. This is followed by five chapters dealing mainly with the material culture of the mid-twentieth-century home. The author analyses how furniture, stoves, refrigerators, washing machines, and dryers were advertised and sold by manufacturers and evaluated by Canadian women. Whereas the beginning chapters are very much in line with economic history, the latter ones venture into new territory. Because of the originality of this part of her study, I concentrate on it.

Parr argues that, whereas Canadian women valued practical considerations over design principles, men in design, manufacturing, and museums tended to herald novelty, appearance, and gadgetry. Evocative citations from women writing in the 1950s show how frustrated they were with the manufacturers' emphasis on new design principles and appearance to the neglect of performance and ease of handling (pp. 212–213). She describes how recommendations from women in the Canadian Association of Consumers concerning performance testing of appliances and housewares were not accepted by the men of the National Industrial Design Council (p. 211) or promoted by museum curators and trustees.