



South Reen, County Cork, Ireland. All images this article courtesy John Kelly and The Tate Modern, South Reen

The Tate Gallery at South Reen, Ireland

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Doctor Donovan and I are just this moment after returning from the village of South Reen, where we had to bury a body ourselves, that was eleven days dead – and where do you think? In the kitchen garden. We had to dig the ground, or rather the hole, ourselves, no one would come near us, the smell was intolerable. We are half dead from the work lately imposed on us. It is now as I write eleven o'clock, and I have not yet dined.¹

The country road turns inland and a hedge begins to block the scenery; however, the sound of waves crashing and the squawks of sea birds tell me I am still very close to the steep cliffs that form the rocky shoreline of Castlehaven. I hear the distant sound of a voice float across the green fields as I notice a gap in the hedge, next to a 'no trespassing' sign. On either side of the entrance, a ditch covered in bramble makes access impossible, except for one small gap, just wide enough for a person to get through, so, like the children of Ireland, who until the 1820s were often educated in secret and illegal 'hedge schools', I duck in and find a thin worn path leading up the hill. I feel nervous trespassing like this, but am reassured that the voice in the distance is a long way away, speaking softly on the wind.

I am here in South Reen to learn more about the Great Irish Famine, or more appropriately An Gorta Mór, The Great Hunger.

In 1847, McCarthy Downing recalled to Mgr. O'Rourke of Maynooth the first case of death from starvation: It occurred at South Reen, five miles from the town of Skibbereen. The case having been reported to me, as a member of the Relief Committee, I procured the attendance of Dr Dore and

proceeded to the house where the body lay ... All was wretchedness around. The wife, emaciated, was unable to move and four children, more like spectres than living beings, were lying near the fireplace ... The doctor opened the stomach, and repugnant as it was to my feelings, at his solicitation, viewed its contents, which consisted of a few pieces of raw cabbage undigested.²

It was the first of many deaths on this peninsula.

The village of South Reen, or more properly speaking, the village of the dead ... consists of about nineteen houses, nine of which sent the entire inhabitants to another, and I trust, a better world.³

In 1846, the first year of the great hunger, the British Admiralty created a chart mapping the village, so the position of each house can still be identified even though they vanished a few years after this tragedy, except for one, which still stands roofless today. When you understand the scale of this disaster, you begin to understand why the Irish have always needed to maintain their identity, signposting their presence, grouping together as they were scattered to the four corners of the earth.

From my vantage point, I can see four white walls, looking like a giant displaced sugar cube, poking out of the valley, contrasting sharply with the vibrant green. Moving closer, one notices that the walls are thick, very thick and strangely familiar. I follow the track down and it leads to a doorway in the bottom right-hand corner. Entering, I marvel at the height of the three vertical windows that seem to climb like ladders to the white cloud overhead. If the ceiling exists at all, it must be of the most efficient, self-

cleaning glass ever invented. I step out into the large white room, and notice the thin floorboards and immediately recognise where I am. I am standing in gallery six on the third floor of the Tate Modern – not the original, for this is not a dream – but a 1:1 model transported to this green valley in Ireland.

The wall to the left has copper text standing proud, directly opposite the three windows that seem superfluous given that light falls directly from above. It begins to rain ever so lightly and my suspicions are confirmed: there is no glass shelter from the elements, which is why the copper letters bleed green down the wall. The text is a reproduction of an open letter written in 1846 by N.M. Cummins, originally published on Christmas Eve in the *London Times*. It contains Cummins's appeal to the Duke of Wellington to save the poor souls of Ireland who were beginning to die *en masse*. The letter's contents describe further horrific scenes that were happening on this very spot during that cruel winter. Cummins, a Protestant landowner, risked social exclusion to make this appeal: some say he died a broken man.

In the middle of the room is a sculpture. It is highly polished and mirrors the room and some further text on the end wall that also reads in copper lettering. The sculpture's shape forms a type of Irish cross, but there is something odd about it, something not quite symmetrical. The cross is made by repeating three times a simple head shape from Sir Sydney Nolan's iconic work *Boy and the Moon* (1939). I look up to the heavens, as the rain gets heavier. Why no ceiling, no roof? Then I understand. The British government, having failed to protect the people from the food crisis, assisted the landlords in forcing a mass exodus by simply removing the roofs of their houses.

To add to the universal distress caused by this system of seizure, eviction is in many cases practised, and not a few of the roofless dwellings which meet the eye, have been destroyed at the instance of the landlords, after turning adrift the miserable inmates ...⁴

The total number of people who had to leave their holdings in the period is likely to be around half a million, and 200,000 small holdings were obliterated ... Even when tenants were evicted in the dead of winter and died of exposure, the British Home Secretary, Sir George Grey, rejected the notion that house-destroying landlords were open to any criminal proceedings. British Parliament passed a law reducing the notice given to people before they were evicted to 48 hours. The law also made it a misdemeanor to demolish a dwelling while the tenants were inside. As a grand gesture of goodwill, the law prohibited evictions on Christmas day and Good Friday.⁵

The dispossessed, the poor and the starving turned to petty crime (at least you were fed while awaiting transportation), or went to the workhouse where separation from family, illness and death awaited. Ethnic cleansing might be a more appropriate term to describe what was happening.

But why is a room from the Tate Modern included in the art, instead of housing the work in London or Liverpool's



The Tate Modern, South Reem

Tate? To understand this, we need to leave Ireland, and return to 1846. At this time, Henry Tate, whose name still adorns a multinational sugar company and the Tate Galleries, was a greengrocer in Liverpool. By the end of the 1840s Tate owned a chain of shops selling fruit and vegetables at the very time An Gorta Mór was halving the population of Ireland.

In January [1847] *The Times* announced that there were 15,000-20,000 Irish paupers in Liverpool, and forecast darkly 'a Mayo on the banks of the Ribble, and even of the Thames'. By April the Irish in Liverpool were being described as 'pestiferous' ... Both *Punch* and the *Illustrated London News* ran counter to this anti-Irish current: *Punch* criticised the 'Pseudo-Saints of Liverpool' for their cruelty to Irish immigrants, and the *Illustrated London News* said of the treatment of the Irish at the hands of Liverpool parish officers: 'far more care would be taken of Irish cattle'.⁶

Ireland was 'very much weeded both of paupers and bad tenants'.⁷

Tate sold his shops and with the proceeds bought the patent that allowed him to produce sugar cubes in Liverpool. The Tate Gallery defensively points out that he did this only after the sugar industry was freed from slavery, implying that Tate's benefaction is clear of any association with the slave trade, although it seems unlikely that the sugar industry went from being rooted in slave labour to utopian working conditions in the short period between slave emancipation and Tate making his fortune. Tate's fortune allowed him to acquire an impressive art collection, which he bequeathed to the nation soon after the famine, on condition that a public gallery was built to house them and that this gallery would promote British art, which it still does today in the Tate Modern.

One of the great mysteries of An Gorta Mór is the absence of art that describes the famine, unlike in France, where Jean-François Millet's *Prayer for the Potato Crop* (1857) became an iconic painting, albeit under another title.⁸ Images of the tragedy were broadly confined to the *London Illustrated News*; not the important galleries of London or Dublin. The famine was not a subject that a British art patron wanted to see, and British or Irish artists had little chance of a



1) Room six, third floor, Tate Modern, London

2) Tate Modern @ South Reen

commission. The consequence of this was there is very little art relating to An Gorta Mór and the evictions that followed.

This is the strongest reason for commandeering an art gallery from this prestigious contemporary British institution, a former power station, to house one of the most important artifacts of the famine: the N.M. Cummins letter.⁴ If ever an institution was the antithesis of a famine, it is the Tate Gallery, built on wealth created first from greengroceries and then sugar, at a time when people were starving within its own community.

In the aftermath of the Irish Great Famine, no public monument was erected to the memory of its victims.¹⁰

Standing in the gallery, the rain clears and blue sky juxtaposes against the white walls as the sun glints on the mirror of the sculpture at its centre; a sculpture that references creative acts by descendants of the Irish Diaspora. The gallery takes on the feel of a sacred enclosure that connects one's thoughts to the Matisse Chapel in Venice or Rachel Whiteread's 'library' in Vienna.¹¹ I leave the room and climb the hill, retracing my steps on the track that leads away from this 'hedge' memorial. One of art's great historical functions is to act as a personal record of memory; not a dry record of statistics, but a vivid portrait of events interpreted from the artist's viewpoint. It is not objective, however it is added to the reference library of human history. I think of Picasso's *Guernica*, named after the village bombed by the Germans during the Spanish Civil War; the painting's meaning reinforced by the story of a German general who, on visiting Picasso's Paris studio, pointed at the painting and demanded: 'Did you do that?' To which Picasso is said to have replied: 'No, you did!'

As I get back to the actual hedge and duck down to make my exit, I wonder why this artwork has no signs or markers telling people where it is – I only chanced on it with some local assistance. Don't be mistaken: there is a wealth of images of it and articles in magazines and newspapers have appeared. This work however is not a tourist attraction, it is not a public memorial, it is not signposted, tour groups are not welcome, there is no shop, no toilets, and buses do not fit down the narrow lane. It is, after all, a work of art on private

property and where the hedge entrance can be closed off without notice. Before setting off, you would be wise to seek local knowledge, for you can't see it from the road and you have to risk fields of cattle to get to it.

1. *Cork Examiner*, 1847 (exact date unknown). The extract begins: 'Mr Blake of Georges's street, received a letter from Dr Crowley of Skibbereen, dated 22nd January – Friday. We extract the following passage.'
2. Peter Foyne, *The Great Famine in Skibbereen*, Irish Famine Commemoration Skibberren Ltd. 2004, p. 53.
3. Foyne, 2004: pp. 68-69.
4. Quoted from 'The Great Irish Famine', Unit III, Activity I, www.cirefirst.com/archive/unit_3.html
5. James S. Donnelly, Jr. Mass evictions and the Great Famine: The clearances revisited, in Cathal Póirtéir (ed.), *The Great Irish Famine*, Mercier Press, 1995, p. 157.
6. Melissa Fegan, *Literature and the Irish famine, 1845-1919*, Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 62.
7. Fegan, 2002: p. 62.
8. The title of this painting was later changed to *The Angelus*.
9. Contrasting this work is the original letter held in a small glass case dedicated to the famine at Cork's museum opposite a much larger one displaying the signed shirts from Roy Keane and Sonia O'Sullivan.
10. Fegan, 2002, p. 62.
11. The library referred to is a memorial to the Jewish victims of the Nazi regime.

John Kelly is an Australian, British, and Irish artist who lives in Cork, Ireland. The work described in this article forms part of Kelly's selection as one of thirty-six finalists in the McClelland Sculpture Survey & Award 2012 exhibition, 18 November 2012 to 14 July 2013. www.johnkellyartist.com