

RESEARCH NOTE

FORGETTING AND REMEMBERING THE IRISH FAMINE

ORPHANS: A CRITICAL SURVEY

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Introduction: An Example of Forgetting and Remembering

A decade ago, while researching family history, Richard Olive of Melbourne was pleased to discover shipping records that revealed his great-grandmother, Johanna Sullivan from County Cork, had arrived in Adelaide in September 1849 on the *Elgin*. Noticing that she was only 15 years old, he began to search the records for her parents, only to find, to his surprise, that all the 190 passengers on the ship were teenage girls. As Richard drove his granddaughter, Eva, home from school that afternoon, he told her about his discovery. She asked him in what year Joanna Sullivan had arrived and, when he replied ‘1849’, they both quickly realised that this was during the Great Famine. Eva said: ‘Sounds to me like she was an Earl Grey orphan’. But, although Richard knew his Australian history well, he had never heard of Earl Grey—beyond it being a type of tea.¹ Eva told him that she had come across the Earl Grey orphans in a novel she had recently read: *Bridie’s Fire*, written by Kirsty Murray and published in Sydney in 2003.²

That Richard Olive had never heard of the Earl Grey Famine orphan scheme is a reflection of the impact of forgetting on Australian history, and especially on Irish-Australian history. That Eva Olive had read a novel about the Earl Grey orphans indicates that work done over the past three decades by historians, writers and artists has moved the Famine orphans back into living memory. The historian Guy Beiner,

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having published an influential 2007 book on the folk history and social memory of the 1798 Rebellion in parts of the south of Ireland, followed this up in 2018 with another book about 1798, but this one investigated how the rebellion had been largely forgotten in Ulster. Beiner believes that we cannot fully understand why societies remember certain events unless we also understand why they forget others.³

Why were the Irish Famine orphans forgotten for so long in Australia, even by their own descendants, when copious records and reports about them were preserved in numerous libraries and archives? Equally, why in recent decades have they suddenly been remembered again—not merely restored to family memory and to historical discourse, but hailed as founding mothers? The following pages cannot hope to provide complete answers to all these large and challenging questions, but they can at least begin the task of seeking answers. This article investigates the change in public awareness reflected in the Olive family story. It first surveys colonial and twentieth-century critics of the Famine orphan scheme; then highlights the influence of Trevor McClaughlin's 1991 book; it reviews the responses of family historians, the role of memorials, and representations of the orphans in literature, song, folklore and electronic media; before finally offering some reflections on forgetting and remembering in the face of trauma.⁴

The Famine Orphan Scheme and its Contemporary Australian Critics, 1848–50

Those known today as the Earl Grey orphans, or the Irish Famine orphans, were around 4,114 young women and girls, mostly aged between 14 and 19 years and many Irish-speaking, who arrived in the Australian colonies on 21 vessels between October 1848 and August 1850.⁵ Under a government-funded migration scheme, they had been selected from the thousands of female teenagers confined in workhouses across Ireland as a result of the Famine. Not all had lost both parents, but all had parents who had either died or, if alive, could not provide for them.⁶ Death rates were extremely high in the overcrowded workhouses during the late 1840s, and thus migration guaranteed these girls some sort of future at least.⁷ The Australian colonies were in need of women at the time, both as servants and as wives for their disproportionately large male populations. The British government believed it could solve two problems at once: one, the problem of too many destitute women in Ireland dependent upon government support; the other, the problem of too few young women in Australia able to provide stable homes and families for male colonists.

The scheme takes its name from Henry George Grey, 3rd Earl Grey, the son of a former British prime minister and an Anglo-Irish mother, who in 1846–52 was secretary of state for the colonies. The day-to-day management of the scheme was, however, entrusted to the Colonial Land and Emigration Commission in London, whose agents were charged with selecting, provisioning, transporting and generally looking after the girls, so as to ensure their safe arrival in the colonies. Richard Reid, an expert on mid nineteenth-century Irish immigration to New South Wales (NSW), has pointed out that

the precise interplay between the secretary of state and the commissioners in terms of administration remains obscure. But, regardless of who exercised control, the scheme was short lived, being terminated prematurely in 1850 after operating for barely two years. Reid labelled it, in terms of emigration policy, a ‘failure’.⁸

Before most of the girls had even set foot in Australia, let alone had time to begin their new lives there, the scheme was already being condemned as a failure—and perhaps even worse than a failure. Many colonists, whose money was helping to fund the scheme, protested that it was in effect an underhanded attempt by Grey to renew transportation. The orphan girls were on occasion compared to convicts. This was in part because, during the late 1840s, sometimes using the same ships that carried the orphans, Irish female convicts were being transported in increasing numbers to Van Diemen’s Land (VDL), as a consequence of an upsurge in petty property crime caused by the Famine.⁹ Grey had also begun in 1846 sending the wives and children of some former convicts to NSW, as well as, in 1848, men known as ‘exiles’: that is convicts who were given a conditional pardon after serving most of their sentence in the United Kingdom—the condition being that they removed themselves to Australia.¹⁰ Colonists had forced the suspension of convict transportation to NSW in 1840, against Britain’s wishes, and some suspected that schemes like those of the orphans, the families and the ‘exiles’ were part of efforts by Grey to revive it.

Around 2,200 of the orphan girls were sent to Sydney on 11 ships, with nearly another 1,300 going to Melbourne on 6 ships and a further 600 to Adelaide on 4 ships. Dr Henry Grattan Douglass, the Dublin-born Protestant surgeon on the first ship, the *Earl Grey*, which arrived in Sydney in October 1848 carrying girls from Ulster workhouses, created a major scandal when he condemned the behaviour of 56 of the girls from Belfast. According to him, most were ‘public women’, that is prostitutes, and they had used the ‘most obscene and blasphemous language’ throughout the voyage, while constantly squabbling and pilfering. They were not fit to be the mothers of future colonists, Douglass warned, and he protested strongly against what he called ‘this system of workhouse colonization’.¹¹ Douglass was a controversial figure: a difficult, argumentative man, he had been involved in repeated disputes with colleagues and with the NSW authorities since his first arrival in Sydney in 1821.¹² His claim that many of the orphans were prostitutes was not true, but the widespread publicity it received in the colonies seriously damaged the scheme right from the outset.

As well as fears about a possible revival of convict transportation, anxieties over class, gender, ethnicity and religion are also very evident in the attacks on the *Earl Grey* scheme. Instead of unloading its convicts on them, some NSW colonists were now concerned that Britain was attempting to unload its paupers. Worse still in the eyes of these mostly male, British, Protestant colonists, they were being sent paupers who were female, Irish and Catholic. Sectarian and ethnic prejudices were significant factors in attacks on the scheme. Yet, by no means all the orphans were Catholics, as their critics repeatedly claimed; and Protestants figured prominently in some groups accused of particularly bad behaviour. Of the so-called ‘Belfast girls’ aboard the *Earl Grey*, 47

of the worst offenders identified by Douglass were quickly banished by the NSW governor north to Moreton Bay and Maitland.¹³ But, around 67 per cent of these girls were Protestants, while only about 38 per cent of them seem actually to have been from Belfast. Out of four girls Douglass named as prostitutes, three were Protestants, one having been born in England. As the *Earl Grey* carried girls from Ulster workhouses, it is perhaps not surprising that the majority (61 per cent) of the 184 orphans on board the ship were Protestants.¹⁴

Sectarianism, along with anti-Irish sentiment, was especially evident in responses to the Famine orphans in the Port Phillip District of southern NSW, soon to become the new colony of Victoria. During 1850, led by Alderman William Kerr, founder of the Melbourne *Argus*, and Edward Wilson, the paper's editor, a campaign was launched to put an end to the Earl Grey scheme. The *Argus* wanted government-funded immigration of Irish Catholic girls stopped because the colony, it claimed, was 'being inundated' with 'miserable paupers' from Ireland. The women were 'untrained' as servants, many being thoroughly 'worthless characters'. Their 'previous intellectual occupation' had consisted in little more than 'occasionally trotting across a bog to fetch back a runaway pig'. The paper slammed both the moral and physical qualities of the orphans. They were 'trollops', it claimed, with 'squat stunted figures, thick waists and clumsy ankles', who threatened to harm the 'physique' of future generations of colonists. They would 'wed with our shepherds, hutkeepers, stockmen &c.', who were 'little better than heathens'. The offspring of such unions would inevitably be raised as Catholics, since all the orphans were 'exclusively Roman Catholics'.¹⁵ Oddly enough, this diatribe appeared in the *Argus* on 24 January 1850, just two weeks after the arrival in Melbourne of the *Diadem* carrying 204 orphans. These girls were all from Ulster workhouses and, like those on the *Earl Grey*, 61 per cent of them were actually Protestants. Overall, of the 1,280 orphans sent to Melbourne, 19 per cent were Protestants.

Kerr was, like Douglass, a quarrelsome man who made enemies easily, as well as being grand master of the Orange Order in Melbourne. He was a protégé of his fellow Scottish Presbyterian, the Rev. John Dunmore Lang.¹⁶ In NSW throughout the 1840s, Lang was probably the most outspoken opponent of Catholic Irish immigration. He, Kerr and other hard-line Protestants were convinced that all the Irish orphans were Catholics and, moreover, that the Earl Grey scheme was calculated to transform NSW into a bastion of Catholicism—or what Lang termed a 'Province of Popedom'.¹⁷

These inaccurate and alarmist attacks on the orphans did not go unchallenged, however. After an extensive investigation, Lord Grey dismissed Douglass's sweeping claims as grossly exaggerated, but voices were raised publicly in the colonies as well in support of the girls. Ironically, critics like Lang and Kerr succeeded in rallying the Irish and uniting them in defence not just of Irish female immigrants, but of the whole Catholic community. The Tipperary-born journalist Edmund Finn, vice-president of Melbourne's St Patrick's Society, wrote articles favourable to the Earl Grey scheme in the *Melbourne Morning Herald* and was active in early 1850 in organising meetings to counter criticisms of the orphans. In his *Chronicles of Early Melbourne*, published

in 1888, Finn says that the girls, ‘though rough enough in some respects, were honest, virtuous and teachable’ and many ‘proved to be excellent household servants’.¹⁸ Cork-born Bishop James Goold chaired a meeting in defence of all Irish Catholic colonists, protesting especially at the way criticisms of the orphan scheme had been turned into ‘malicious’ and ‘ignorant’ attacks on the Catholic Church. John O’Shanassy, later to be the first Catholic Irish-born premier of Victoria and a man who was employing two orphans who had arrived on the *Pemberton* in May 1849, also spoke out at meetings in support of Irish assisted immigration generally. Similar attacks on and defences of the orphans featured prominently in Sydney, Adelaide and Moreton Bay newspapers as well.¹⁹

The Orphans in Later Accounts, 1930s to 1980s

Although the Earl Grey scheme was seldom mentioned by Australian historians before the 1990s, when it was occasionally referred to, the orphans continued to be portrayed as little more than prostitutes, paupers and petty criminals—that is, in much the same way as they had been represented in the prejudiced press reports of 1848–50. This was because historians relied uncritically upon these reports as their principal sources. Robert Madgwick’s 1937 study of immigration to eastern Australia before 1851 was reprinted several times and became an influential and often cited work. Madgwick, as has been shown in Cassandra Mackie’s recent study, largely repeated the assessments of men like Douglass and Kerr, portraying the girls as generally bad characters who were unsuited to the needs of the Australian colonies.²⁰

The few histories of the Famine being published in Ireland during the mid-twentieth century also took a fairly dim view of the Earl Grey scheme. Oliver MacDonagh used Madgwick as a source in his chapter on emigration in the important 1956 book *The Great Famine*, edited by R.D. Edwards and T.D. Williams. While arguing that, overall, the scheme had been ‘tolerably successful’, MacDonagh explained its premature termination as due to ‘anti-Catholic and anti-Irish sentiment’ in the colonies. But, at the same time, he was no fan of the orphan girls, writing that, whereas prejudice certainly told against them, they also struggled to find work because they were ‘quite untrained as domestic servants’. In addition, MacDonagh defended Dr Douglass, claiming he had been made a ‘whipping boy’ by British politicians and that the scandal of the *Earl Grey* had been ‘shabbily hushed up’.²¹

As late as the 1970s, influential works on Australian history were still repeating the attacks published in 1850 by newspapers like the *Argus*, *Sydney Morning Herald* and *South Australian Register*. Michael Cannon, for example, in a 1971 best-selling study of nineteenth-century Australia drew heavily upon press reports when he criticised Irish immigrants generally for being ‘particularly troublesome’ and condemned the Famine orphans as ‘violent’, ‘disorderly’ and ‘obscene’. A more detailed and balanced account of the orphan scheme was offered during the mid 1970s by Frances O’Kane in

her history of the Catholic Church in early Victoria, but this book was nowhere near as widely read as Cannon's popular work.²²

Patrick O'Farrell, in his seminal 1987 history, *The Irish in Australia*, discussed the 'orphan girls' at some length. Yet, unlike most Australian historians, he recognised that much of the 1848–50 newspaper coverage was biased against the Irish and Catholics. Therefore, contemporary press reports could not be accepted at face value. He suggested that the 'girls themselves' wanted to emigrate and that they were 'promptly employed on arrival at good wages', being initially 'more or less welcome'. But a 'highly undesirable Belfast element' on the first ship tainted the whole enterprise and, by 1850, 'colonial criticism had become so intense as to force the termination of the scheme'. He thought, however, that South Australia presented a 'happier picture' of the orphans' experience. Yet, strangely, he then went on to describe the orphans sent to Adelaide as 'short and ugly', 'primitive' and as exhibiting a 'loose' lifestyle, claiming that '[h]alf the prostitutes in Adelaide in 1851 were Irish orphans'.²³ Thus, while questioning the reliability of colonial press reports, O'Farrell still seems to have believed many of their slurs against the orphan girls. In their *New History of the Irish in Australia*, Elizabeth Malcolm and Dianne Hall pointed to an 1850 official survey of the roughly 620 orphans sent to Adelaide that challenged the bad press the girls had received. In addition, Jade Hastings has recently highlighted prejudice against the orphan girls and demonstrated how this influenced South Australian newspaper coverage.²⁴

O'Farrell was convinced that the 'great disaster of the Irish Famine had largely passed Australia by'.²⁵ For him, the Famine had little impact because he believed only about 23,000 Irish immigrants arrived in the colonies during the 1840s, whereas 101,500 came in 1851–60.²⁶ It was the 'gold rushes which established Irish Australia', O'Farrell argued, not the Famine.²⁷ He was ignoring, though, the sharp rise in the number of Irish convicts transported to VDL from 1847, many for famine-related offences. While, more importantly, he was also overlooking the fact that the mostly young, single Irish immigrants who arrived during the 1850s, if not exactly 'Famine refugees', were certainly Famine survivors, having lived through and been shaped by the disaster as children—just like the Famine orphans. Interesting new Irish research has recently highlighted the serious long-term physical and mental health impacts that famine can have on those who experience it as growing children.²⁸

During the 1980s there were signs of increasing interest in the Earl Grey scheme in Ireland itself, alongside increasing interest in emigration more generally. Joseph Robins, a retired Irish civil servant who published a series of works about child welfare, mental health and medicine, devoted a chapter to the orphan girls in his 1980 study, *The Lost Children: A Study of Charity Children in Ireland, 1700–1900*.²⁹ Robins provided one of the earliest detailed accounts of the scheme, relying for his information mainly on British official correspondence and reports, rather than on the colonial press. He concluded that the scheme failed, not primarily because of the character of the girls, but because the Australian colonists were no longer willing to accept the 'unwanted produce of the workhouses and gaols of Britain and Ireland'. He thought that most of

the girls probably ‘behaved well’, but they were ‘young and ignorant’ and some had succumbed to their ‘new and unaccustomed freedom’—which appears to have been his diplomatic way of suggesting that they had become prostitutes.³⁰

With interest about Australia being stimulated in Ireland by the 1788 bicentenary, historians Richard Reid and Trevor McClaughlin—themselves both Irish immigrants to Australia—produced accounts of the Earl Grey scheme in 1987–8 aimed at Irish audiences. They published articles in Irish family history journals.³¹ McClaughlin was also interviewed about the orphans by BBC Radio Northern Ireland. Reid presented the orphans’ story and shared details of the 1848 voyage of the *Earl Grey* with the Charabanc Theatre Company, a ground-breaking Belfast feminist company that staged a series of new and important plays during 1983–95. These interventions contributed, in September 1991, to the Replay Theatre Company premiering John P. Rooney’s play about the orphans, *Permanent Deadweight*, at the Down County Museum. Set in a Belfast school during 1991, according to Rooney, the play ‘uses the play-within-a-play technique’. Four contemporary schoolgirls, sent out of class for misbehaving, stumble upon a school play about the orphans and ‘these modern-day sin-bin girls discover they have more in common with the production’s orphan protagonists than they think’.³²

The following year, the Melbourne *Age* published a long, well-researched article by Andra Jackson, then based in Belfast, about Rooney’s play and its historical context. Appearing a fortnight after the broadcast of a joint ABC/BBC television series entitled *The Leaving of Liverpool*, which dealt with twentieth-century British child migrants, Jackson’s piece expanded the scope of child migration to include Ireland during the Famine years. Indeed, John Alsop and Sue Smith, who wrote the screenplay for *The Leaving of Liverpool*, had been influenced by Robins’ 1980 Irish book, *The Lost Children*, mentioned above. Jackson analysed *Permanent Deadweight* in light of comments by the historians McClaughlin and Reid, as well as by Trevor Parkhill of the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland, and she interviewed the young women actors involved.³³

Early in 1992, the History Teachers’ Association of Victoria sent representatives to Belfast to see Rooney’s play and tried—in vain it seems—to have it brought to Australia. Undeterred, the Association went on to produce an educational kit about the orphan girls, which included a video cassette of *Permanent Deadweight*. Richard Reid regards this as the ‘first serious education-based use of the orphan story in Australia’.³⁴

McClaghlin and Writings about the Orphans since 1991

The real turning point as regards memory of the Famine orphans came, however, in 1991, with the publication of Trevor McClaughlin’s book, *Barefoot and Pregnant?*, which was followed in 2001 by a second volume with the same title. He convincingly challenged the largely negative consensus surrounding the orphans that had endured

for nearly 150 years, highlighting the positive roles that many of the women played in their later lives, some of which stretched on into the 1920s.

The book was composed of three main sections. The first devoted 30 pages to describing the scheme and the scandal surrounding the first contingent of girls on the *Earl Grey*, while the second section reproduced 130 pages of official documentation about the scandal. Section three, which ran to a little over 250 pages, was a register of the names and details of all the orphans, organised according to where they arrived and on which ship. Funded by the Australian Research Council and Sydney's Macquarie University, McClaughlin drew on the assistance of many scholars and family historians, whom he duly acknowledged. The second volume of the book, which appeared a decade later, again reproduced the orphans' register, though with corrections and additions, but it also contained a great deal more documentary material, especially extensive extracts from contemporary Australian newspapers.

It is impossible to overstate the importance to family historians of the register of orphans that McClaughlin compiled and published. The girls were listed according to the ship on which they arrived, with their ages, native places, parents and religious denominations included. McClaughlin also provided, where the information survived, notes on their initial employers and their later lives. Readers were helped by the fact that the register was indexed, with a separate index for the book's other sections.

While McClaughlin's book undoubtedly marked a major breakthrough, it did have shortcomings. The title, *Barefoot and Pregnant?*, even with the question mark added, was unfortunate: it seemed flippant and played into prejudice. It was also inaccurate since there is no evidence that any of the girls on departure or arrival were either barefoot or pregnant. In the 1991 volume, the first and second sections focused mainly on Sydney and the *Earl Grey* controversy. The second volume, however, extended the geographic range by reproducing substantial amounts of material from Melbourne, Adelaide and Moreton Bay newspapers. But, in considering the scheme, McClaughlin largely confined himself to the Australian colonies. Little attention was paid to either the girls' backgrounds in Ireland or to how the scheme was viewed in the Irish press and by Irish political and religious leaders.

The appearance of McClaughlin's first volume was timely, coming as it did near the start of several years of commemorative events in both Ireland and the diaspora to mark the 150th anniversary of the Famine. Having attracted only limited scholarly and public interest during the twentieth century, there was a major international turnaround beginning in the mid 1990s, marked by an outpouring of publications about the Famine, as well as a plethora of public ceremonies and functions, and the construction of a host of new memorials. The Great Famine was suddenly being remembered in quite spectacular fashion.³⁵ Irish Australians organising their 150th Famine commemorations were able to draw on McClaughlin's recent book. The appearance of works specifically about the orphans or at least relevant to them gathered pace throughout the 1990s. The published proceedings of the Irish-Australian conferences held in 1990, 1993, 1995 and 1998, all contained articles dealing with or touching upon the orphans. In addition,

in 1998, McClaughlin edited an important collection of articles on *Irish Women in Colonial Australia*, many of which discussed the orphans. (See the Select Bibliography below for details of these articles.)

Information relevant to the orphans also sometimes came from unexpected sources. Richard Reid argued that immigrants to NSW in the 1850s, who were Famine survivors, brought with them a 'consciousness' of the suffering caused by the disaster and thus they responded generously to later Irish crises: for instance, donating large sums to relieve economic distress in Ireland during the food crisis of 1879–80. In an earlier study, Larry Geary had cited Famine survivors who spoke publicly at ecumenical fund-raising meetings held around Australia in 1880. At one such gathering, the humanitarian governor of Queensland, Sir Arthur Kennedy, who had been a poor law inspector in County Clare during the worst years of the Famine, spoke for many when he said: 'I can never forget it ... To see the frightful ravages which it committed amongst us, both young and old, was something to try the strongest and it tried me severely'.³⁶

Yet research in medical history has suggested that Famine survivors, especially young women, also carried more tangible legacies of the Famine with them. In her 1998 history of Melbourne's Royal Women's Hospital, which was established in 1856 by a Limerick-born doctor, Janet McCalman brought to light an important but sad physiological fact about female Irish immigrants. A little over half the women who gave birth in this charity hospital in the late 1850s were Irish, and McCalman found that a number who had grown up during the Famine had suffered such severe malnutrition that their pelvises were deformed. Presumably these would have included some of the orphan girls. However, having been well fed in Australia, such women could produce large babies, even though it was impossible for the child to be born naturally. Women died as a result, while babies also died as doctors tried to deliver them by means of forceps. 'At its worst, in 1860', wrote McCalman, 'one in fifteen of the patients born in Ireland had a contracted or deformed pelvis and all of them were of an age to be children during the famine'.³⁷ The medium- to long-term physical impact of the Famine on the bodies of its survivors, including those like the orphans who had apparently escaped it by coming to Australia, is a topic in need of much more investigation.

Five years after McClaughlin's ground-breaking book on the orphans, as if to answer the question in its title, Richard Reid and Cheryl Mongan published a study of the 194 mainly Catholic girls from Connacht and Munster who reached Sydney in February 1850 on board the *Thomas Arbuthnot*. The book was called '*A decent set of girls*': the title being a quote from Charles Strutt, the ship's surgeon, who on arrival helped many of the orphans settle in southeast NSW. The book reproduced Strutt's journal, as well as extensive related documentation, while 100 pages were devoted to genealogical information about the 102 girls who settled in the Yass and Gundagai areas.³⁸ Both authors had considerable experience of family history groups and, in particular, of the Yass Heritage Project. Reid brought to the work the expertise that he had developed when writing a doctoral thesis on Irish assisted immigration to NSW during 1848–70.³⁹ In 1992, he had published an article in a local history journal which

stimulated discussion in the Yass area about the orphans who arrived on the *Thomas Arbuthnot* with Charles Strutt. Reid argued that, in contrast to their hostile receptions in Sydney and Melbourne, the orphans were welcomed by the people of Yass.⁴⁰ Yet, even so, memory of them still seems to have disappeared relatively quickly. In the forward to *'A decent set of girls'*, local historian Fr Brian Maher remarked that the book's account of the orphans in and around Yass meant that, for the first time, 'hundreds and perhaps thousands of Australians discovered the beginnings of their family history'.⁴¹

The first work published in Australia wholly devoted to the Famine was entitled *Australian Commemoration of the Great Irish Famine: Proceedings of Conferences, March 1996*. It contained copies of lectures delivered at a series of Irish government sponsored and locally organised conferences held in Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne to mark the Famine's 150th anniversary. Among the speakers, Richard Reid, Jennifer Harrison and Val Noone included discussion of the Famine orphans.⁴²

In addition to academic studies, a large body of journalism has also accumulated over the years about the orphans and their family histories. Examples can be found in Irish-Australian publications, like the Melbourne-based magazines *Táin* and *Tinteán* and the Sydney-based newspaper, the *Irish Echo*. Articles have also appeared in genealogical society magazines and in the mainstream press; and there have as well been contributions on radio and television. (A full list is beyond our current resources.) Some articles have also been published in Ireland. In 1999, for example, the Irish-born, Australian-based journalist and academic, Siobhan McHugh, wrote a substantial piece for the *Irish Times*, which contributed to growing public awareness of the orphans in their homeland.⁴³

Although not as intensive as during the 1990s, both academic and popular interest in the Earl Grey scheme has continued through the first quarter of the twenty-first century, and it has extended beyond Australia's shores via the internet and overseas publications. (For online material, see below in the section that includes electronic media.)

In Ireland, recent books, commemorative events and monuments have increased public awareness of the Famine orphans. Cork University Press's massive 2012 *Atlas of the Great Irish Famine*, which sold very well in Ireland, has two chapters on Australia: one by novelist Thomas Keneally and the other by Queensland historian Jennifer Harrison. Both discuss the orphans, although without adding much in the way of new information. Keneally's piece mainly relies on McClaughlin's work, but it wrongly identifies Charles Gavan Duffy as a Famine immigrant—he did not arrive until 1856—and gives confusing figures on Irish Famine migration to Australia. Harrison is more precise and up-to-date and has some interesting material on Moreton Bay, but parts of her discussion of NSW overlap Keneally's contribution.⁴⁴

In 2014, in more focused studies, two local Irish historians investigated their area's involvement in the Earl Grey scheme. In Kerry, Kay Moloney Caball studied the lives from baptism to departure of 117 girls from workhouses in Dingle, Kenmare, Killarney and Listowel, who travelled to Sydney and Adelaide on four ships, the *Thomas*

Arbuthnot, John Knox, Elgin and Tippoo Saib. Although she grew up in Listowel and went to school a few hundred metres from where the workhouse had stood, Caball admitted that she had ‘never heard of the Earl Grey Scheme until two or three years ago’. She noted that in February 1848 the Dublin *Nation* newspaper, then edited by Gavan Duffy, condemned the scheme roundly as ‘one of the most diabolical proposals ever made or conceived since Cromwell’s time’—an important insight into the neglected topic of Irish reactions. But, highlighting the large number of people, including young girls, who died in Kerry workhouses during the Famine, Caball concluded that, on balance, ‘there is no doubt that the Earl Grey Scheme was an opportunity for most of the girls who were “selected” in Dingle, Kenmare, Killarney and Listowel’.⁴⁵

Meanwhile, in Donegal, Anthony Begley was tracing 19 orphan girls from counties Fermanagh, Leitrim and Donegal, who left the workhouse in Ballyshannon to travel to Plymouth, from where they sailed to Sydney on the *Inchinnan*, arriving in February 1849. Begley’s booklet, published by the Ballyshannon Town Council, outlined the available information on each of the girls. It accompanied the unveiling in September 2014 of a memorial built by the council beside the old workhouse, which featured a large pot used in the past to feed workhouse inmates, surrounded by plaques on which the names of the orphans were inscribed.⁴⁶

The orphan girls have recently also come to public attention in the United States. Quinnipiac University in Connecticut, which houses Ireland’s Great Hunger Institute and Museum, began publishing an important series of ‘Famine Folios’ in 2014, followed by two collections of articles in 2018, one on women and the other on children.⁴⁷ Rebecca Abbott, a film maker and professor of communications at Quinnipiac, contributed a chapter on the Earl Grey scheme to the book about women. In this she published material about the Sydney Famine memorial (discussed below) drawn from a documentary she had made entitled *Ireland’s Great Hunger and the Irish Diaspora*, which was first shown in 2016. When she was compiling the film in 2013, she visited Sydney, inspected the Hyde Park Barracks memorial and interviewed Trevor McLaughlin, Perry McIntyre and Richard Reid. They in turn introduced her to some descendants of Famine orphans, whom she also interviewed.⁴⁸

In another chapter in the same book, Gerald Moran, who is based at the National University of Ireland, Galway, discussed workhouse emigration generally, while focusing on a scheme to send workhouse girls to Canada in the early 1850s. Moran drew attention to the fact that the Earl Grey scheme was part of much larger British government attempts to encourage Irish workhouse women and girls to emigrate—an aspect often neglected in the Australian literature.⁴⁹ Many orphans had also arrived in Canada at the height of the Famine in 1847 and 1848. As Marianna O’Gallagher has shown, officials, doctors, church groups and humanitarians in Quebec and Ontario had striven with notable success to care for the numerous Irish children orphaned by their parents’ deaths, either on board ships crossing the Atlantic or at the Grosse Île quarantine station and its associated hospitals.⁵⁰

Family Historians and the Famine Orphans

Substantial numbers of family historians have drawn upon McClaughlin's register to include the Famine orphans in their books and on their websites. Indeed, family historians have added much relevant information about the outcomes of the scheme in terms of the later lives of the orphan girls. Two recent examples are books published in 2019. One, *'Fair Delinquents'?* by Leonie Blair and Perry McIntyre, contains biographical profiles of 185 girls who went to the NSW town of Bathurst. The other, *Earl Grey's Daughters: The Women Who Changed Australia* by Jonathon Fairall, has a somewhat misleading title. It is not a general survey of the Earl Grey orphans and their impact, but rather a study of the life and times of Eliza Dooley, an ancestor of the author's wife, who arrived in Sydney in July 1850 on the *Tippoo Saib* with her sister Catherine.⁵¹

Since, with variations, Richard Olive's story with which this article began has been multiplied around Australia, let us first note some further aspects of his case. He contacted and spoke with the novelist named by his granddaughter, Kirsty Murray, who directed him to Terrie Pollard, then secretary of the Sydney Irish Famine Commemoration committee, and to Trevor McClaughlin's book. Olive discovered that his great-grandmother, Johanna Sullivan, had been born in 1835 to Cornelius and Johanna Sullivan. In 1849, both parents were in the Kanturk workhouse in northwest Cork though, by 1850, they were listed as dead. In South Australia, Johanna spent four years working in an unspecified job, before at Morphett Vale she married Peter Burns, a carpenter from Newry, County Down. Johanna and Peter had ten children and eventually settled in the Western District of Victoria. Although literacy classes were offered on board the *Elgin*, Johanna was not able to sign her marriage certificate. She died at her son's home in Euroa, Victoria, at the age of 60 in 1895. Descendants have in recent years added a plaque to her previously unmarked grave. Ellen Sullivan, Johanna's 16-year-old sister, was also an Earl Grey orphan, arriving in Sydney on the *Maria* in August 1850, 11 months after Johanna reached Adelaide. But there is no evidence that the sisters resumed contact in Australia. Richard Olive described Johanna's life as a 'heroic triumph', but he commented that 'it seems astonishing that no word of her humble beginnings filtered even as far as her grandchildren'.⁵²

Up until the last 30 or 40 years, many descendants of Australia's early settlers demonstrated a remarkable amnesia as regards their ancestry. Today, having a convict or a Famine orphan in the family is something to be proud of, but that was far from the case in the past when the 'convict stain' especially was something to be dreaded.⁵³ Shortly before her death in 1914, Sarah O'Malley, who reached Melbourne from the Roscrea workhouse in north Tipperary on the *Pemberton* in May 1849, incorrectly told one of her children that her real name was 'Goodchild' and that she was English, having been born in Derbyshire.⁵⁴ The claims made by contemporary critics that many of the orphans were, at best, 'worthless characters' and, at worst, 'trollops' probably meant that, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, orphans such as O'Malley

and also orphan descendants—like the convicts and their descendants—were ashamed of their origins and anxious to forget them.

While bibliographic and other listings of family history publications dealing with the Earl Grey scheme do not seem to be available, a quotation from Joan Dwyer provides a window onto some themes found in family histories. Dwyer is the great-granddaughter of Eliza Fraser, an 18-year-old Belfast Protestant, who arrived on the *Earl Grey*. She was one of the girls banished to Moreton Bay due to Dr Douglass's complaints. In a 2013 interview with ABC Radio National, Dwyer said of Frazer, who married a labourer, had six children and died in Brisbane in 1903:

If there's one word I have for them, it's survivors. Every time I think of Eliza, I laugh. I say, you beat the system. No matter what they threw at you, you got through it. I see them as like the street kids of today. Be honest about it. They were maybe not the most attractive people in the world, they might not have been educated, they were foul-mouthed, they drank ... is it their fault? They're children. But they're strong, they're survivors. With the right opportunities they can be the foundation of stable families for the future.⁵⁵

It is worth recognising in the context of family history that a number of past and present notable Australians are descendants of Famine orphans. They include, among others: the author Arthur Hoey Davis, who wrote under the penname 'Steele Rudd'; a former governor-general, Sir William Deane; the novelist Dymphna Cusack; former Australian Labor Party prime minister, Kevin Rudd; the National Party's former leader, Barnaby Joyce; ABC broadcaster Julia Baird and her brother, Mike, a former Liberal Party premier of NSW; and Irish-Australian historians, such as Jeff Kildea and Elizabeth Malcolm.⁵⁶ 'Steele Rudd', who wrote the very popular 'Dad and Dave' stories, first published in book form in 1899, was one of 13 children born to Mary Green, a 14-year-old orphan from Tuam, County Galway, who arrived in Sydney on the *Inchinnan* in February 1849. The character of Dad, a selector on the Darling Downs in southern Queensland, where many Irish immigrants settled and 'Rudd' himself grew up, is at once a typically comic stage Irish figure, but at the same time, in McClaughlin's view, he is the 'embodiment of the Australian everyman'. In his stories, 'Rudd' seemed bent upon leaving the Irish past behind and transforming Irish immigrants into quintessential Australians.⁵⁷

During the 2018 annual commemoration at the Famine Rock in Williamstown, near Melbourne (discussed below), Noeleen Lloyd and other descendants of Irish settlers in northeast Victoria shared information about Famine orphans, Bridget Young from Galway and Margaret White from Clare, both of whom arrived in Sydney in 1850 as 16-year-olds on the *Thomas Arbuthnot*. Bridget and Margaret were the mothers respectively of Kelly gang members, Steve Hart and Joe Byrne.⁵⁸ Did their mothers' experience as Famine orphans influence Hart and Byrne in their decision to join Ned

Kelly, an Irish convict's son who railed against English oppression of the Irish in both Ireland and Australia?

There is much we still do not know about the later lives of the orphans, although family historians and also Trevor McClaughlin continue to gather information. But, as in the case of writers like 'Steele Rudd' and bushrangers like Hart and Byrne, there are also questions as to what extent children were aware of and influenced by their mothers' experiences of famine and of being one of the frequently reviled Irish Famine orphans. Did mothers do what Sarah O'Malley obviously did and deliberately lie to their children about their past—as appears to have happened with some convict parents too—and so, did the family forgetting of the orphans that puzzled Richard Olive begin with the very next generation, perhaps as early as the 1860s?

Sites of Memory: Memorials and Monuments

A leading French historian of memory studies, Pierre Nora, developed the concept of *lieux de mémoire*, which is usually translated in English as 'sites of memory'. He was referring especially to memorials, monuments and places where historic events are remembered and commemorated, mainly through ceremonies, speeches, parades and sometimes re-enactments. Writing in the 1970s and 1980s, Nora argued that modern, largely urban societies, or groups within them, which had lost touch with the traditional realm of rural folk memory, were increasingly creating sites of memory in order to re-connect with their pasts, or what they imagined their pasts to have been. According to Nora's view, commemorative memorials should be interpreted, not only for what they tell us about historical events, but also for what they reveal about the identities and values that the societies and groups which erected them were aiming to promote.⁵⁹

On present evidence, it would appear that the first monument in a public space in Australia to the victims of the Irish Famine and also the orphan girls was the Famine Rock at the port of Williamstown near Melbourne. Evoking memories of an ancient Irish standing stone, the basalt monument was dressed by master stonemason John Luchetta, whose mother was Irish. Erected by the Melbourne Irish Famine Commemoration committee, with the support of Hobsons Bay Council, and funded by public subscriptions amounting to \$8,000, the Famine Rock was unveiled by the then Irish ambassador to Australia, Richard O'Brien, on 6 December 1998. That date marked the 150th anniversary of the arrival in Hobson's Bay (within the larger Port Phillip Bay), off Williamstown, of 191 Famine orphans mainly from Connacht and County Donegal on board the *Lady Kennaway*, the first orphan ship to reach Melbourne. Victor Briggs, Boon Wurrung elder, made a speech of welcome; a Presbyterian minister laid a wreath of orange flowers; and a Catholic priest read a blessing. In his speech, Ambassador O'Brien took an inclusive approach, linking the sufferings of the victims of the Irish Famine with those of people displaced in the modern world.⁶⁰

The plaque on the stone reads:

In memory of one million people who died in Ireland during the Great Hunger of 1845–52. In praise of tens of thousands of dispossessed Irish who sailed to Hobson's Bay to build a new life. In sorrow for the dispossession of the Bunurong and Woiworung people but in a spirit of reconciliation. In solidarity with all those who suffer hunger today.

As far as is known, this is the only Famine monument to include acknowledgement of the dispossession of First Peoples by Irish settlers. In her study of Irish Famine monuments worldwide, Emily Mark-Fitzgerald noted that the Melbourne monument pays tribute to the Aboriginal people, whereas most monuments, she argued, avoid awkward aspects of the Famine, such as the role played by Irish immigrants in British colonisation.⁶¹

In Sydney, a committee, chaired by Tom Power and backed by the Historic Houses Trust, the Commonwealth and NSW governments, the City of Sydney, the Irish government and private donors, organised and funded the construction of a powerful memorial to the Famine at Hyde Park Barracks, where the orphan girls were housed on arrival. Designed by Adelaide-based Hossein and Angela Valamanesh, who won a national competition for the memorial, the sculpture features a rupture in the barracks' wall, a glass screen with 400 orphans' names inscribed on it and a bronze table, half of which is symbolically in Famine Ireland and half in the new world of Sydney. Called 'The Australian Monument to the Great Irish Famine 1845–48', the memorial cost \$350,000 and was unveiled by Governor-General Sir William Deane on 28 August 1999. On a visit to Sydney twelve months earlier, Irish President Mary McAleese went to the Hyde Park Barracks and pledged that the Irish government would contribute over one-sixth of the cost. Although primarily commemorating the Famine and implicitly remembering the Irish who came to Australia during and immediately after the Famine, by locating the work at Hyde Park Barracks and including orphan girls' names, the committee had in effect portrayed the workhouse orphans as epitomising Australia's link to the Famine. In addition to erecting the memorial, the Sydney committee continues to fund three associated outreach programmes. One aiming to teach African refugees was initiated by the Sisters of Mercy at the historic Mamre homestead in western Sydney; the second is a prize awarded since 2005 at Macquarie University for a BA Honours thesis dealing with Irish-Australian history or with world poverty and famine; and the third is an annual scholarship begun in 2009 to support a female refugee student at Western Sydney University.⁶²

Catherine Marshall, an Irish art historian and curator, has remarked that the non-figurative Sydney monument, like the Melbourne Famine Rock, relies on symbolism. There is no 'grand narrative' in these works, Marshall wrote; they are monuments to the 'nameless, the non-heroes, those who were actually there'. She contrasted this with a tendency she observed in some memorials to the Famine in the United States to be

‘dominated by the theme of survival, of triumph over appalling tragedy’; ideas which can, she claimed, ‘displace memories of the Famine’ itself.⁶³

Both the Sydney and Melbourne monuments were several years in the making, during which time there were soul-searching debates among committee members and community supporters about their views on the Famine and its Australian legacy, as well as about the goals and styles of the memorials. As part of this process, public educational events were held during 1995–7 at Canberra’s Irish Club and at Macquarie University in Sydney; in Melbourne, at Fitzroy, Port Melbourne, the Celtic Club, Victoria University and the Council of Adult Education; while, in Perth, a conference was organised at the city’s Celtic Club by the Australian-Irish Heritage Association.⁶⁴ At these many gatherings, revisionist, republican, nationalist and other views of the Famine were debated, and comparative talks were given about twentieth-century famines in Africa and Vietnam. Less than 10 per cent of the presentations, though, were about the orphan girls. Both monument projects encountered opposition: in Sydney, establishment figures opposed an Irish memorial at the prestigious colonial heritage site of Hyde Park Barracks; in Melbourne, a prominent historian claimed that the Rock at Williamstown was romanticising the Famine.⁶⁵ The monuments were preceded by a good deal of study and were the result of difficult negotiations and lobbying. When completed, they became texts in stone, metal or glass, rather than print, reflecting, as Pierre Nora suggested such works do, ongoing discussion about the legacy of the Famine.

In October 2008, marking some ten years since the Melbourne and Sydney monuments were erected, Cheryl Mongan and Richard Reid organised a five-day conference, ‘Far from Famine’, at St Clement’s Monastery, Galong, NSW, once the home of ex-convict squatter Ned Ryan. Building on successful conferences for Irish-Australian family historians previously held at the venue, this occasion was marked by a focus on the Famine and by the dedication of a memorial in the Galong cemetery to Anne Howcroft, née Ryan, from Scarriff, County Clare, one of the *Thomas Arbuthnot* girls who became a servant at Ned Ryan’s property (they were not related). She married and had two children, but died at Galong in 1855, aged only 21. Fourteen speakers, including Galway-based archaeologist Michael Gibbons, delivered papers about the Famine and also the Earl Grey scheme. Trees were planted to signify each of the 21 ships that brought the orphan girls to Australia and, on the weekend, there was an ecumenical service of thanksgiving for the girls, as well as a concert.⁶⁶

A feature of the official visit to Australia in October 2017 by Michael D. Higgins, president of Ireland, was the unveiling of Irish Famine memorials in Perth, Western Australia (WA), and Hobart, Tasmania. The bronze monument in Perth, designed by Joan and Charles Smith, was a joint project of the City of Subiaco and the Western Australian Irish Famine Commemoration committee, chaired by Fred Rea. Unveiled on 9 October, it features a childless mother keening, and commemorates the large numbers of young Irish women encouraged to immigrate to the Swan River colony during the early 1850s, after the end of the Earl Grey scheme, as servants and potential wives for the mostly male colonists.⁶⁷

In Hobart on 14 October, President Higgins unveiled the ‘Footsteps to Freedom’ sculptures on Macquarie Wharf, an arrival point for convicts. These life-size figures of three women and a boy are a memorial to Irish women convicts transported to Tasmania (then VDL), including those sent during the Famine. The sculptor was Irish-born Rowan Gillespie, who in 1997 had created the well-known Famine figures on Dublin’s Custom House Quay. Between 1845 and 1853, nearly 7,500 Irish convicts were transported to VDL, many of whom had committed famine-related crimes, with a little over one-third being women. Although they have not been studied as extensively as the orphan girls, scholars in Tasmania and elsewhere have been researching the surviving records and trying to make their story better known.⁶⁸

On both occasions President Higgins commented on the Famine orphans of the Earl Grey scheme—none of whom were sent directly to WA or Tasmania—and linked them to WA’s bride ships and Tasmania’s convict ships. All were part of attempts by the British government to free itself of responsibility for Ireland’s poor. He doubted how voluntary the migration of the orphans actually was and asked: ‘Is there not something deeply unsettling in the attitude of the then imperial social engineers, such as Earl Grey? With starvation and disease ravaging the land, with their daily reality of wretched workhouse conditions, I wonder, could the girls have really opted not to come?’⁶⁹

Skibbereen in southwest Cork, recognised at the time of the Famine as one of the worst-affected parts of the country, has also in recent years publicly commemorated its connection to the Earl Grey scheme. Of the 118 Irish workhouses that sent orphans to the Australian colonies, Skibbereen provided the largest single contingent. Early in 2018, as part of a community arts project in conjunction with Skibbereen Hospital, artist Toma McCullim created a sculpture composed of 110 bronze spoons to commemorate the 110 Skibbereen orphans, 85 of whom reached Adelaide in September 1849 on the *Elgin*, with the others arriving in Melbourne in March 1850 on the *Eliza Caroline*. The sculpture is embedded in a large piece of WA rainbow sandstone donated by the Australian government and is situated near the Famine graveyard in the hospital’s grounds.⁷⁰ In addition, a memorial to the orphan girls has also been erected in Ballina, County Mayo, where Barbara Barclay, an Australian who has lived in Ireland for many years, continues to research the 137 orphans despatched from Mayo, having established a website about them in 2015.⁷¹

Literature, Song, Folklore and Electronic Media

At least two novelists, one Australian and one Irish, have made noteworthy contributions to the recovery of the memory of the Famine orphans: Kirsty Murray and Evelyn Conlon. Murray has written a quartet of novels aimed at teenage readers that span some 150 years of Irish-Australian history, of which *Bridie’s Fire* was the first. The character of Bridie, mentioned by Richard Olive’s granddaughter, arrives in Australia in 1850 as an orphan from a Kerry workhouse and has many adventures, including some on

the Ballarat goldfields.⁷² The memory of the orphan girls also recurs in the final novel in Murray's quartet, *The Secret Life of Maeve Lee Kwong*, published in 2005. The Australian-born Maeve of the title is of Irish and Chinese parentage. Aged 14 and encountering the Williamstown Famine Rock for the first time, she muses on her Irish and Chinese ancestry and how they relate to her sense of being an 'Aussie'. Through the character of Maeve, Murray seeks to introduce her young readers to a consideration of the roles of memory and ethnic identity in Australia's multi-cultural society.⁷³

Evelyn Conlon's 2013 novel, *Not the Same Sky*, is about the surgeon Charles Strutt and four of the Famine orphans of the *Thomas Arbuthnot*. The story is built around the journey to Australia in the 2000s of Joe Kennedy, a fictional Irish sculptor who is designing a monument for a Sydney group commemorating the Famine. Like Murray, Conlon is concerned with how memory of the past can impact the present. In her *Irish Times* review, Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, who found the novel complex and beautifully written, commented that Conlon raised important questions such as: 'Why do we yearn to remember what we did not have to endure?' In another review, literary scholar Rebecca Pelan made a related point. 'The novel', she wrote, 'is not about Ireland or Australia or the Famine or the girls themselves for that matter, but, rather, uses all of these creatively to envisage the very notion of memory itself.'⁷⁴

Poetry about the Earl Grey scheme is less common. But a poem by Pamela O'Connor, entitled 'Female Irish Orphans', does appear at the beginning of McClaughlin's 1991 book, while another entitled 'The Search' by J.F. Robinson was published in the second volume. Two lines of Irish poetry by Máire Ní Dhroma also surround the plaque on the Williamstown Famine Rock: 'Ni hé Dia a cheap riamh an obair seo; / Daoine bochta a chur le fuacht is le fán. God never planned this work: Poor people put out in the cold and set wandering'. The sentiment expressed was obviously intended to challenge any notion that the Famine was somehow a divine or providential disaster—a convenient explanation promoted by many during the late 1840s, including British cabinet ministers and administrators.⁷⁵ A decade after the Rock was unveiled, Debra Vaughan, an orphan descendant, and Ada Ackerley, secretary of the local historical society, discovered an 1849 poem by James Wallace, headmaster of St Mary's Catholic School in Williamstown, welcoming the girls and defending them against attacks in the *Argus*. Among other things, he wrote: 'Joyful is my heart to find you / Landed on this happy shore ... where no pauper prison stands'. Along the walking-riding bayside path, where it passes the Famine Rock, Hobsons Bay Council has created a marker with the full text of Wallace's poem.⁷⁶

Further evidence of how the restored memory of the orphan girls is stimulating the creative arts can be found in an Irish play and two Australian songs. In 2011, having read McClaughlin's book among others, Irish writer and dramatist Jaki McCarrick created a play about the orphans entitled *Belfast Girls*. The play has been successfully performed in London, Stockholm and various American and Canadian cities, as well as in 2019 at Queanbeyan, NSW, and McCarrick has recently turned it into a screenplay for a film.⁷⁷ Vincent Brophy, who lives in Tasmania, has written a popular

ballad about the voyage of the *Thomas Arbuthnot*, entitled ‘Famine Ireland’, which begins, ‘My name it is Charles Strutt’.⁷⁸ Brendan Graham, well-known as the author of the lyrics of ‘You Raise Me Up’, wrote ‘Orphan Girl’ for the annual Sydney Famine Commemoration in 2012. On that occasion, it was performed by Sarah Calderwood and the Australian Girls’ Choir, under the direction of Jane Hennessy and accompanied by Mark Chamberlain.⁷⁹ A YouTube clip of students at St Mary’s Secondary School in Ballina, County Mayo, singing ‘Orphan Girl’ at the unveiling of a monument to the orphans in October 2018 has also enjoyed considerable popularity.⁸⁰

Those working on the history of the Famine orphans in Australia lack the rich oral resources of the Irish Folklore Commission that Guy Beiner had in Ireland and used to such good effect in his 2007 book, *Remembering the Year of the French*. Nothing about the Famine orphans was collected in the early works of Australian folklore, such as Banjo Patterson’s *Old Bush Songs* of 1905. And the 1950s’ upsurge of collecting associated with John Manifold, John Meredith, Ron Edwards, Hugh Anderson, Maryjean Officer and others came too late—and they, like Patterson, collected only in English. Two anthologies of Irish-Australian literature—one by Bill Wannan, published in 1965, and the other by Colleen Burke and Vincent Woods, published in 2001—contain no mention of the Famine orphans. However, Burke and Woods have collected half a dozen 1847 Australian poems about the Famine.⁸¹

The most important online resource for the Earl Grey scheme is currently the orphans’ database on the website of Sydney’s Irish Famine Memorial.⁸² In addition, as mentioned already, Trevor McClaughlin’s blog, ‘Trevor’s Irish Famine Orphans’, contains substantial additional family information, much of it gathered since he published his 1991 and 2001 books. With McClaughlin’s support, in September 2019, the online Irish magazine, *Tinteán*, started publication of a monthly series of short articles describing the lives of particular orphans, written by their descendants.⁸³ The Public Record Office Victoria also has a work-in-progress Wiki page on the Earl Grey scheme.⁸⁴ A good deal of information about the Famine orphans and related family history is shared on Facebook, but an evaluation of such pages is beyond our resources.⁸⁵

In addition to the American documentary about the Famine by Rebecca Abbott, already mentioned, another documentary merits brief comment to end this survey. It is a low-budget, but high-standard, film made in 2013 about female Irish convicts transported to VDL before and during the Famine. Entitled *Mná Dibeirthea* or *Banished Women*, it includes a section on the Famine orphans. Produced by Siobhán Lynam and Barrie Dowdall for TG4, the Irish-language Connemara-based television station, the film makes good use of interviews in English with a large group of Tasmanian and other historians, including Lyndall Ryan, Lucy Frost, Trudy Mae Cowley, Alison Alexander, Portia Robinson, Gayle Hendrikson, Hamish Maxwell Stewart and Dianne Snowden.⁸⁶

Conclusion: Disremembering and Remembering the Famine Orphans

After discovering his Famine orphan great-grandmother, Richard Olive doubtless spoke for many Irish-Australian families in similar circumstances when he said that he did not understand why ‘no word of her humble beginnings filtered even as far as her grandchildren’. The work of Guy Beiner on memory, mentioned earlier, may help answer Olive’s question. In addition to using the word ‘forget’, Beiner has sought to reclaim an old Hiberno-English vernacular term, ‘disremember’, which, though little used in Ireland today, was common during the nineteenth century. He argues that events are often not truly forgotten; they are not completely lost due to no written record or folk memory having survived. Records and memories do survive, as in the case of the Famine orphans, and yet individuals, families, communities and states still choose, for a variety of reasons, to dismember—that is not to remember.⁸⁷

One well-documented reason for disremembering is trauma. Studies of Jewish Holocaust survivors have shown that initially many would not speak about their experiences, even to their own children and grandchildren; and, indeed, children could find such stories deeply distressing. But, especially through the work of oral historians in the United States and Israel from the 1970s onwards, the personal memories of Holocaust survivors began to be recorded and preserved.⁸⁸

The Irish orphan girls also experienced trauma, in the form of the Great Famine, which for them included, in addition to hunger and destitution, their parents dying, homes and communities being destroyed and the struggle to survive in overcrowded, disease-ridden workhouses. This was followed by the trauma of being shipped, as teenagers without family support, on a long and dangerous voyage to the far side of the world, where they were swiftly indentured to sometimes unsympathetic British employers. In a study of migration, Don Charlwood argued that the very voyage to Australia was such that ‘when at last [immigrants] landed, they were by no means the same people who had boarded ship months before’.⁸⁹ Pointing out how geographic displacement from Europe to Australia broke traditions or rendered them tenuous, Geoffrey Serle stressed that: ‘Culture is a highly perishable growth which, transplanted, cannot bloom as before’.⁹⁰ This is especially true of those who move to an English-speaking society from, in the case of many of the orphans, an Irish-speaking one and to a literate society from an oral culture, as much of rural Ireland then was. Adding to the stresses of the voyage and dramatic cultural change, the orphan girls, like many Irish immigrants, were confronted on arrival in Australia with anti-Irish prejudice, but, in their case, it was especially intense. That some orphans chose not to speak about their ordeal, or that others suffered mental health problems as a result of it, is not to be wondered at.⁹¹

This survey has suggested that there is an important story to be told as to why the Famine orphan girls were forgotten, not only by their own families, but by Australia more generally. That story, which requires much more research, should reveal much about the problems Australian society has experienced—and continues to experience—in coming to terms with its history of violent colonisation and also,

more specifically, the problems Anglo-Australia has had in the past with accepting Irish Australia.

However, by surveying published studies, memorials, literature, songs, folklore and electronic media, this article has demonstrated that interest in the Famine orphans has surged over the last 30 years. Why it has surged at this point in time is another important question that needs to be addressed. Obviously, the Famine did not pass Australia by as O'Farrell claimed in the 1980s. Yet, we require more information about these young women: about their backgrounds in Ireland and Irish attitudes to the scheme; about their journeys to and arrival in Australia; and about how they lived their later, sometimes long, lives. In addition, how their traumatic experiences of famine and forced migration impacted them, both physically and mentally, and how these in turn impacted their children are topics that we still know far too little about.

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78. Vince Brophy's CD, *Brophy's Road*, is available from: vbrophy@ozemail.com.au.

79. The song 'Orphan Girl' is available on a fund-raising CD from the Great Irish Famine Commemoration Committee, at P.O. Box 209, Roseville, NSW 2069, or through: contact@irishfaminememorial.org.

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