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“But most brothers when in misfortune”: a transnational approach to natural disasters

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In January 1820, large parts of the provinces of Gelderland and Brabant in the Netherlands were flooded. Tens of people died, cattle drowned, and survivors took refuge in neighbouring churches and cities. Local and national newspapers were filled with saddening descriptions of the affected areas: for instance, the *Nederlandsche Staatscourant* reported on 7 February of that in the village of Asperen the houses had become severely damaged (“grootelijks bschadigd”) and even uninhabitable (“onbruikbaar geworden”) when water broke through the Nieuwe Zuidelingedijk (*Nederlandsche Staatscourant* 1820, 3). Collections were held in every corner of the country to remedy the severe losses of afflicted communities (Beijerinck 1820). Remarkably enough, the help also came from abroad. The English press reported extensively about the calamities, and encouraged citizens to show empathy. The response was massive, and amongst the contributors were highly influential persons like the Duke of Wellington, Arthur Wellesley, and the British foreign secretary, Lord Castlereagh (Robert Stewart) (Beijerinck 1820, 331).

Nowadays, this huge catastrophe, however, is mainly remembered within a national context: according to the weather historian Jan Buisman, it belongs to the Dutch canon of extreme weather events (Buisman 2011, 258–261). Contemporary and present-day representations of this disaster configure it as a typical example of the ongoing struggle by the Dutch people against water, which is seen as a key element in the shaping of a Dutch cultural identity (Schama 1987; Lange 2017; Jensen 2021). Likewise, other European nations refer to prototypical catastrophes as important events in their national histories: think, for instance, of the many eruptions of Mount Vesuvius in Italy in, amongst other years, 1822, 1868, and 1872; the rock slides in Switzerland; and the periods of famine which occurred in Ireland in 1822, 1845–1849, and 1879–1880 (Kinealy 1997; Pfister 2002; Cecere et al. 2018).

In cultural memory, these European catastrophes have mainly been imagined from a national perspective: they are often configured as building blocks of a national self-image that was shaped through the many visual and textual media of the time that communicated these events and linked them to the nation’s identity, such as literary texts,

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paintings, newspapers, and illustrated periodicals (Leerssen 2006, 188, 190). Giuseppe De Nittis's painting "L'Eruzione del Vesuvio" (1872) is a clear example of how natural disasters became shaped by cultural discourses, an idea that has recently become foregrounded in disaster studies scholarship by, amongst others, Gerrit Jasper Schenk who has proposed a research focus on disasters as "sociocultural constructs" that include "the perception and interpretation of dangers, risks and disasters, cultural dealings with them and their long-term effects" (Schenk 2007, 15). However, Italian artist De Nittis's 1872 studies of Mount Vesuvius, displayed in museums in, amongst other places, Milan and Vicenza, are by no means the only artworks to give expression to the volcano's catastrophic outbursts: previously, Norwegian artist J. C. Dahl (1822), British painter Clarkson Frederick Stanfield (1838), and German-American painter Albert Bierstadt (1869) had depicted Vesuvian eruptions, while the 1855 outburst was reported in the *Illustrated London News* on 26 May of that year, accompanied by a "precise Sketch, taken on the spot" by Henry Warford (1855, 500). Natural disasters were therefore mediated across national borders, in the foreign press or by foreign artists and authors, and held interest for audiences across and beyond Europe.

This article will argue that it is necessary to shift nation-oriented paradigms in disaster studies to transnational ones. It will look at natural disasters through a transnational lens, pointing to the urgency of such a methodology as well as presenting four concrete case studies: the floods of 1820 and 1861 in the Netherlands, and the famines in Ireland of 1845–1849 and 1879–1882. While these calamities occurred in a period during which nation-states emerged and strong feelings of nationalism were propagated across Europe, these seminal events nonetheless led to the shaping of transnational communities. As we will demonstrate, the press played a crucial role in connecting people across and beyond Europe when disasters took place: newspapers and magazines, which reached large readerships, prompted relief operations, evoked empathy with those afflicted by the calamity in foreign parts, and stressed the obligation to help fellow-citizens elsewhere in Europe in times of trouble. Often, their coverage of natural disasters abroad included engravings, in order to appeal to what Laurel Brake and Marysa Demoor have called "a popular appetite for illustration" (Brake and Demoor 2009, 5). This combination of "pictures and words" which served to "create meaning in conjunction with one another", as Peter Sinnema's seminal work has suggested (1998, 3), bears witness to the role of nineteenth-century newspapers and magazines as not just carriers but active agents in generating affect and "meaning-making" (Dillane 2018, 79). These media representations, moreover, often interpreted these European calamities through analogous cultural images, tropes, discourses, and reports or fictional narratives of (similar memories of) catastrophe. This is even the case when it concerns disasters that impacted communities on different scales, or that were essentially different in character. In fact, despite that our case studies comprise different types of disaster, at different times and in different countries, there are commonalities in the responses expressed by the printed journalistic media.

Why a transnational perspective?

Over the past decades, the humanities have become inspired by what we can call a "transnational" turn: scholars have repeatedly emphasised the necessity of studying history,

culture, and literature from cross-border perspectives. Steven Vertovec's key study defines the transnational as "sustained, cross-border relationships spanning nation-states" (Vertovec 2009) and Ann Rigney and Chiara De Cesari view transnationalism as transcultural circulations, "interactions and cross-currents" that transcend national borders (Rigney and De Cesari 2004, 4, 7). Such cross-border interactions often take place between diasporic communities and those in the homeland. As Thomas Faist argues, "transnational affiliations" and transcultural dynamics often characterise relations between home and diaspora communities (Faist 2000, 240), and these exchanges can take the form of trade, salary sent to relieve family members or communities in the homeland, or the establishment of affiliated political or cultural organisations in the native and adopted country. However, as Stefanie Stockhurst explains, these acts of transfer between "communicative communities" are often bilateral, and include the exchange of material as well as immaterial goods, such as thoughts, representations, and discourses (Stockhurst 2010, 21). In processes of transnational transfer, money may be exchanged between donating and receiving countries, but the interactions and circulations also comprise texts which circulate and get reprinted, traditions and festivals which are copied, as well as ideas, images, memories, and narratives. Together, these acts of cultural transfer contribute to larger cross-border networks which constitute what Wolfgang Welsch calls cross-national cultural spaces shaped by dynamic transfers of repertoires, artefacts, and representations (Welsch 1999, 15). These dynamic transfers can, moreover, be regarded as "multidirectional" (Valsiner 2001, 41–42) in that the transmitted images or narratives may attain different meanings when relocated to different contexts, or may produce what Michael Rothberg calls "multidirectional memory" as well: a representation of an event in which various narratives of the past, belonging to various ethnic communities, may "overlap," "intersect," and converge (Rothberg 2009, 6, 9).

Nineteenth-century European disasters can be studied through a transnational lens in that they are events which evoked and sustained cross-border economic exchanges in the form of donations. Additionally, as will be demonstrated in our analyses, these disasters were firmly engrained in cross-national, "multidirectional" (Valsiner 2001, 41) networks of media circulation and repertoires of representation. That such a transnational approach towards researching nineteenth-century disasters and their contexts is essential becomes clear from a number of things. First, natural forces which brought about disaster often did not have an exclusively local impact, but affected communities beyond national borders. A well-known example is the outburst of the volcano Tambora in 1815, which caused a serious hunger crisis in Europe – in Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Wales, Ireland – in the years 1816–1817, because of the density of ashes in the air (Behringer 2019). The 1845 potato disease not only affected Ireland, but also led to wide-scale starvation in Scotland, Flanders, and the Netherlands (Ó Gradá, Paping, and Vanhaute 2007; Curtis et al. 2017). Second, charity provided for Europeans afflicted by disasters usually had an international character. Historical records show that donations came from all over the world when large parts of the Netherlands were flooded in 1825, mostly from European countries but also from a Dutch pastor in Philadelphia (Beijer 1826, 766). Among those donating money was the Czar of Russia, Alexander I, who gave 100,000 guilders (approximately 2.1 million euros now). With this generous gift, he expressed his gratitude for the support the Dutch House of Orange offered a few months earlier,

when the River Neva flooded and caused severe damage and many deaths in the surroundings of St. Petersburg.¹ One could therefore argue that networks of charity for disaster victims operated extensively across Europe during the nineteenth century, and that reciprocity played an important role in shaping these connections.²

Third, news about catastrophes travelled in international contexts. Tidings about the calamities were disseminated through prints, books, novels, poems, songs, and, above all, newspapers and periodicals. Several newspapers in Ireland, like the *King's County Chronicle* of 22 October 1845, reported on how in the village of Marum in Groningen, the Netherlands, potato crops were “equally attacked by the disease” that ruined the potato fields in Ireland, bearing witness to a shared disaster (1845, 4). The Danish *Illustreret Tidende* of 8 November 1868 extensively covered floods in Switzerland, the “Oversvømmelserne i Schweiz”, through an article and a full-page engraving which depicts the locals’ futile struggle to save their possessions from the rising water (1868, 47–48).

In what follows, we will provide four case studies to demonstrate that disasters, especially as they were depicted in the media, demand that we reconsider the idea of what is Europe, and what constitutes a community. Many scholars of nineteenth-century Europe have pointed at the necessity to extend Benedict Anderson’s concept of “imagined communities” from the national to the transnational level (Anderson 2006, 3). Most notably, media historians working on the nineteenth century have increased our awareness of the existence of a transnational culture of news and periodical printing, which connected people across the globe (Smits 2020, 9–11). In our analyses, the role of media representations of natural catastrophes in the formation of processes of transnational identity formation as well as transnational networks of cultural production will become evident.

Dutch case study (I): the flood of 1820

That one can indeed speak of a transnational reception of nineteenth-century European natural disasters in the press becomes clear when one examines the floods of 1820 and 1861 that affected large parts of the Netherlands. In January 1820, drifting ice caused many dikes breaches in the eastern and southern parts of the Netherlands. The areas around Nijmegen, the Alblasserwaard, and ’s-Hertogenbosch were flooded; people and cattle drowned, while some local inhabitants of the inundated areas took refuge in churches or in villages in the vicinity. In the province of Gelderland alone, seventy-two villages were swallowed by the water (Beijerinck 1820). Immediately after the flood, collections were organised in the Netherlands in order to help the survivors. The memorial book, written and published by G. J. A. Beijerinck, contains a long list of the sums that were collected in the provinces of South-Holland and North-Holland. Additionally, his publication contains a list with the names of more than 300 donors from England, who together raised a sum of 19,400 guilders to aid the Dutch victims. Many of them were in trade business with the Netherlands, but there was also a significant number of people who had diplomatic and political connections, such as consuls and ambassadors. The special relationship between both countries, who had been allies during the Napoleonic Wars, was probably of influence (Sas 1985, 109). This explains why highly prolific people such as the Duke of Wellington and Lord Castlereagh expressed their sympathy by donating large sums of money.

Several merchants in the City of London, who were engaged in commercial transactions with the Netherlands, set up a committee and initiated the collection through a subscription system (Beijerinck 1820, 316–333). The Dutch press reported about this British relief campaign. For example, *The Leydse Courant* of 21 February 1820 wrote about the meeting of eighty merchants and gentlemen in the Old London Tavern in the Bishops Gate on 12 February, with the aim of setting up a committee to alleviate the “nood,” the distress, in the Netherlands, in a London pub (*Leydse Courant* 1820, 4). At the same time, the extensive coverage of the floods in the British press during the first week of February appears to have played a significant role in prompting this British generosity.³ What is more, the aforementioned meeting on 12 February received much attention in the British press as well. A long article in *The Times* of 14 February 1820, which was reprinted in other newspapers, details the proceedings of the meeting, and the arguments delivered in favour of support by merchant William Ward, who had been an eyewitness of an earlier, “similar distress” in the Netherlands, and had noticed how grateful the inhabitants then had been to receive aid from abroad: “the sentiments impressed on the inhabitants towards the prompt and effectual assistance then considered” (“Distress in Holland” 1820, 2).

Furthermore, the article reports of a speech given by Dr. Werninck, reverend at the Dutch reformed church in London, which greatly moved the speakers. As the article shows, Werninck told the horrific story of 1500 men, who had been constantly working to maintain a dike, but were forced to give up their battle against the flood: subsequently many villages and farmlands were swallowed by the ice-cold water. Near the village of Lienden, a breach in a dike of such magnitude took place that the devastating force of the water rushing through it, accompanied with heavy masses of ice, swept away many of the dwellings. The inhabitants who could escape the flood, 750 in total, took refuge in the local church, meanwhile “lamenting the loss of relations, dwellings, and cattle, and reduced at the same time to a state of starvation” (“Distress in Holland” 1820, 2).

The article reports that Werninck concluded his speech by conveying his belief that sympathy with the plight of the Dutch victims would not be restricted to “those persons who held commercial intercourse with Holland,” but that the catastrophe “was calculated to awaken general sympathy in the hearts the British public” (“Distress in Holland” 1820, 2). His claim appears to have been prophetic: the circulation of the news about the committee led to an unexpectedly high amount of donations, also by English citizens who had no specific attachments to or affiliations with the Netherlands (Beijerinck 1820, 327). As the article from *The Times* was republished by many other newspapers and periodicals, such as *Saint James’s Chronicle*, *The Ipswich Journal*, *The Champion*, *The Evangelical Magazine and Missionary Chronicle*, and *The Gentleman’s Magazine*,⁴ it indeed appears to have generated awareness of the suffering of the Dutch among the British public on a grand scale, and to have inspired further financial aid. This becomes evident from reports about donors in Hull, Falmouth in Cornwall, and pupils in Poplar who donated all the pocket money they received the first week after Christmas (*The Royal Cornwall Gazette*, 4 March 1820; *The Morning Chronicle*, 24 February 1820). They were not motivated by specific relationships with the Netherlands, but by general Christian humanitarian motives.

Dutch case study (II): the flood of 1861

Forty years later, another flood that affected primarily the province of Gelderland was to evoke extensive international media coverage and transnational support. The flood of 1861 primarily hit the “Land of Maas en Waal,” when on 5 January of that year a dike in the Bommelerwaard gave way to the pressure of the increased water, and swept twenty-three houses away. At the end of January, ice rocks caused other dikes to break as well. The small village of Leeuwen was exceptionally afflicted: all its thirty-seven inhabitants drowned. The national impact and press coverage were enormous: every Dutch newspaper wrote about the tragedy, and King William III and his brother, Prince Hendrik, visited the stricken area.⁵

Newspapers across Europe, however, also reported about the calamity that had befallen the Dutch people living in the regions along the Rivers Maas and Waal. The French *L’Illustration* paid extensive attention to the disaster on 23 February 1861, describing the “villages emportés,” the villages which are swept away. Interestingly, this article praises what it calls the typical Dutch mentality of courage, calling openly for sympathy for the Dutch who have a long history of fighting against the sea: “These courageous Dutch people well deserve the sympathy of other nations. They always wage battles against the water, with a persistence and energy that never abate in this dreadful duel with this terrible enemy” (“Inondations en Hollande” 1861, 115, translations ours).⁶ As this example reveals, international coverage of disasters often resorted to stereotypes of national character, but it also evoked sympathy for the victims of disaster elsewhere in Europe. Furthermore, coverage of the floods in the issues of 23 February and 2 March was accompanied by engravings, created after sketches by M. W. Hekking, a Dutch local artist.⁷ In both engravings, we see examples of vulnerable women who anxiously look out for help to escape from the flooded areas or redeem their possessions. In both illustrations, the contrast between these passive female victims and the depicted men, who row boats out from the flooded area or who actively attempt to retrieve possessions from the water, endorse existing gender stereotypes. However, these feminised images of victimhood may well have served to generate empathy with the afflicted Dutch population, for we see similar strategies of gendering disaster elsewhere in press coverage. This is, for instance, the case for the biweekly, bilingual Belgian *Le Progrès: Journal de l’éducation populaire* of 21 April 1861, which explicitly called for aid funds for the flooded areas in the form of a (“Souscription en faveur des inondés de la Hollande”, 1861, 89). This call for relief is given further force by the inclusion of an emotive poem, printed in Dutch and in French, about a mother who has to flee the floods, entitled “Voor de arme moeder, vlugtende tydens de overstroming in Holland.” The depiction of the homeless woman, hardly dressed while escaping the inundations, and carrying a shivering infant on her arm, is used to call for help to the paper’s readers: “Bied hulp and bystand” (“Voor de arme moeder” 1861, 90).

The British press paid even more extensive attention to the catastrophe, emphasising the dreadful misery of the people involved:

The great enemy of Holland – water – has again put forth its strength, and broken down the dams which protected households and farms from its devastation The wretched inhabitants of the inundated districts, driven from their homes naked and foodless in this inclement season, are in a state of destitution.

The *Westmorland Gazette* commented on 19 January 1861 (“Foreign Intelligence” 1861, 2).⁸ *The Illustrated London News* of 2 March 1861 published an illustration by the Dutch drawer C. C. A. Last of the bursting of the dike at Bommelerwaard, which portrayed the terrible danger people were in (“The Inundations in Holland” 1861, 199). The indigenous people are depicted in their abortive attempts to rescue their cattle from the water, and are shown climbing the roofs of their houses or rowing away in small vessels in order to escape drowning.

As in the previously discussed engravings published in *L’Illustration*, we see a gender divide in representations of victimhood. The women hold up their arms in despair while the men take up the oars or try to drag cattle out of the water. In fact, one can argue that representations of the Bommelerwaard floods in the British press often focus on the most vulnerable groups afflicted by the disaster – women and children – to elicit pity from the readers. For example, E. B. O. in a letter to the editors of *The Bradford Observer* published on 14 February 1861, focuses on the plight of a group of local Dutch women trying to escape the floods: “four of the number were poor women, in the greatest possible need that a woman can ever know, of comfort, warmth, and attention.” The author additionally reports on “a little child but a few years old whose parents had perished” and who was found by peasants on the rafters of the roof of “one of the demolished houses” (E. B. O. 1861, 5).

In reaction to the abundant press coverage in Britain, subscription lists were opened by the Consul-General of the Netherlands in England. In the *London Daily News* of 23 January 1861, this Consul-General of the Netherlands, J. W. May, and the minister of the Dutch church in London, H. Gehle, announce the formation of a committee, and inform readers where to send their donations. Two-and-a-half weeks later, on 23 January, the names of all eighteen committee members were published in *The London Daily News*. In other parts of Britain, collections were also held to support the victims. The *Newcastle Guardian and Tyne Mercury* of 3 February 1861 announced that subscriptions were received by the Dutch Consul William J. Lange in Newcastle-on-Tyne and that the bankers Lambton & Co. received financial contributions. That the news reached a wide audience is also demonstrated by the fact that in Holmfirth in West Yorkshire, money was collected for the flood victims as part of the church ceremony, as the *Huddersfield Chronicle* reported on 9 February 1861. The fundraising in England thus became very successful: a total amount of 1,821,150 guilders (more than 38,600 euros nowadays) was donated in support of the Dutch victims.⁹

People were encouraged by the British press to donate money for three reasons. First, newspapers emphasised that the English and Dutch were connected through networks, and that trade between both countries shaped strong bonds that should be cherished. E. B. O. in the letter to the editors of *The Bradford Observer*, praises the spectacle of industry and enterprise in the Netherlands and encourages the readers to open up their hearts and donate generously: “Can we not in England give some help? Especially in Bradford, and neighbouring towns, so closely connected in many business transactions with Holland? Are we not bound by every good motive to do something to alleviate the misery?” (E. B. O. 1861, 5).

Second, the British media stressed how both nations were connected through their histories. The *London Daily News* of 7 February 1861 cites Simon Belinfante, who was born in Amsterdam and had a career as a surgeon at the medical faculty at University

College, London, to bring across this point of shared pasts. Belinfante implicitly refers to the times when the King-Stattholder William III “liberated” the English from Catholic rule:

England, the most liberal and charitable country of Europe, allied to the Dutch in race, religion and institutions, will, it is hoped, lend a charitable ear to the appeal of its unfortunates, whom it once so nobly assisted in its independence; and bonds of gratitude will unite more strongly two liberal and civilised nations. (“Inundations in Holland” 1861, 2)

Two days later, *The Norfolk News* also references the historical bonds between both nations and urges the readers to show gratitude towards the Dutch by showing empathy for the flood victims: “England, more naturally allied to the Dutch than France or Germany, will not be less charitable than these countries. England will not forget previous ties of friendship and alliance” (“Foreign Intelligence” 1861, 2). While the distress of the Dutch flood victims is the central focus, this article also foregrounds national qualities such as loyalty and generosity, thereby framing the appeal for help in terms of the construction of an English identity.

Third and finally, newspapers which covered the Dutch floods simply appealed to their readers’ sense of good citizenship. E. B. O, in the aforementioned letter to the editors of *The Bradford Observer* of 14 February 1861, “respectfully” suggests to

all persons interested in our relations with that country, in our trade with her people, or in that humanity that makes brothers of us all, but most brothers when in misfortune, that immediate steps be taken, by public meeting or otherwise, to open subscriptions lists for the relief of this distress. (E. B. O. 1861, 2)

Stressing the urgency to display munificence towards other human beings in need, who are moreover “brothers” elsewhere in Europe, the author utilises a Christian rhetoric which moreover implies the value of transnational solidarity. This becomes clear from the fact that he evokes the memory of the aid given by the English to the French three years earlier, which improved mutual relations:

The French inundations, three years ago, was the occasion of grand practical benevolence on the part of England. We know she has never suffered for her generosity at that crisis. Who can say how much she has indirectly gained by it? Thousands of Frenchmen cherish the memory of that seasonable aid. (E. B. O. 1861, 2)

What is more, the author of the letter to the editor appeals to the readers’ sympathies with the Dutch by bringing back to memory the “fearful ... catastrophe ... occasioned by the bursting of the embankment of a reservoir at Holmfirth a few years ago” (E. B. O. 1861, 2), thereby suggesting analogous episodes of suffering and a similar vulnerability to disaster. Memories of local disaster, ideologies of national character, as well as transnational solidarity thus intersect in formulated motivations for aid.¹⁰

It is interesting to place these textual representations of the 1861 floods in the contexts of earlier studies on donor motivations during the nineteenth century. Gerrit Boomsma and Petra van Dam, who researched charity connected to floods during this era, conclude that religious motives and social duty played a large role, but that charitable activities were also seen as expressions of good citizenship (Boomsma and van Dam 2015). This is certainly what the foreign newspaper publications about the 1861 floods in Gelderland demonstrate. Marcel Mauss famously argued that gifts are never entirely free from self-

interest, but are made with an eye to past or future reciprocal exchange (Mauss 2002). Historians Norbert Götz, Georgina Brewis, and Steffen Werther have recently reframed the concept of “moral economy” to demonstrate what motivates the wealthy and others in generally affluent countries to provide humanitarian aid: specific interests and preferences of donors often play a role, and “a web of moral arguments and choices emerges” (Götz, Brewis, and Werther 2020, 2). This is also what we see in the British responses to the Bommelerwaard floods. However, the appeals for charity printed in the British newspapers also resonate with the painful memories of similar recent disasters that affected the region or nation. It therefore makes sense to examine the representations of disasters in the foreign media in connection to Michael Rothberg’s earlier cited concept of “multidirectional memory” as well (Rothberg 2009, 6, 9).

Irish case study (I): the Great Famine (1845–1849)

Comparing news coverage of the 1820 and 1861 floods with press reports about famines in Ireland may not seem useful at first sight. However, intriguingly, one notices that these media representations of the calamity outside Ireland are remarkably similar to the visual and discursive repertoires used to report of the floods, and there are many similarities in the ways in which the press evoked empathy and aid mechanisms with regard to these famines and the previously discussed floods. One notices that in coverage of both the Irish famines and Dutch floods, the international press often evoked the Christian values of its readers, or emphasised shared religious denominations, as a way to call out for charity.

The famines that occurred in Ireland between 1845–1849¹¹ and 1879–1882 also figured extensively in newspapers and periodicals across and beyond Europe. Ireland’s Great Famine, caused by an infection in the potato crops in successive years, deprived the primarily rural population of its main source of sustenance, thereby causing mass starvation (Ó Gráda 1993; Gray 1995). While approximately one million people died of hunger and famine-related diseases, the Great Famine also saw demographical changes due to emigration. Fleeing the threats of starvation and the limited opportunities for sustenance in their mother country, between 1845 and 1855 2.1 million Irish men and women settled in North (the United States and Canada) and South America (Argentina, Brazil), as well as Australia (Fanning 1987, 6; Miller 1985, 104; Kenny 2000, 137). Relief operations for the famishing Irish were in full swing: as Christine Kinealy, amongst others, reveals, aid was provided by the “British Relief Association” (Kinealy 2013, 167–169), the General Relief Committee of New York, the Sultan of Turkey, the Choctaw Nation (Kinealy 2013, 104–105), the Calcutta Committee, and Quakers in Britain and Ireland. More recently, Francesco Zavatti has drawn attention to fundraising campaigns in Italian states for Ireland in 1847, as lay and religious elites in and outside Rome were important “agents of altruism” (Zavatti 2021, 125), organising alms collections and paving the way for humanitarian relief for Ireland by the global Catholic Church.

Ireland was afflicted by recurring episodes of failed potato harvests and hunger, and 1879 saw a renewed outbreak of potato rot and famine, though on a smaller scale, and particularly in the province of Connacht, which was called *An Gorta Beag*, the small famine (Moran 1997; Jordan 1994, 204). This famine was often related to the previous

Great Famine by spokespersons for the Land League in order to stress the enduring indifference of Britain towards the Irish Question. Consider, for example, Charles Stewart Parnell, who in an 1880 visit to the United States had denounced Queen Victoria for not donating to her famine-stricken subjects in Ireland (Kinealy 2013, 11). Once again, Quaker philanthropists played a significant role in drawing public attention to the plight of the distressed Irish. James Hack Tuke, who had previously offered relief during the Great Famine, visited Donegal and Connacht. In his report, he quotes a local workhouse clerk in Donegal who argues that, if the poor do not get seed potatoes, “the prospect is simply awful: famine worse than in 1847 will ... come” (Tuke 1880, 19).

Outside the island of Ireland, these two significant famines, which were often connected to one another in public discourse, were primarily reported in the British press. Well-known are the two series of reports on the Great Famine, “Sketches in the West of Ireland,” that appeared in *The Illustrated London News* on 13 and 20 February 1847, respectively, and that were accompanied by engravings by Cork artist James Mahoney, who witnessed the calamity first-hand. Mahoney’s illustrations give visual expression to what Mahoney describes in the accounts. Thomas W. Lacqueur has pointed to the emphasis on details of bodily suffering in the nineteenth-century “humanitarian” narrative, arguing that the “reality effect” and a focus on the “individual body” elicited compassion for another community and a desire to deliver aid (Lacqueur 1989, 177). We see these elements of the “humanitarian” narrative recur in the second instalment of the “Sketches,” in the *Illustrated London News* of 20 February 1847. Here, Mahoney describes how not far from the road at Cahera two infants are “turning up the ground to seek for a potato to appease their hunger,” while there are “six dead bodies” half-eaten by dogs, laying there above ground “for twelve days, without the least chance of interment” (Mahoney 1847b, 116). These impressions of starving children on a fruitless quest for anything to eat are further developed in the illustration “Boy and Girl at Cahera”, which shows two emaciated infants in rags, one of whom stares directly back at the reader as an appeal for relief (Mahoney 1847b, 116).

Mahoney’s text and engraving about the wide-scale havoc wrought by the blight foreground a vulnerable class of victims of the disaster: children. The same applies to the first instalment in the *Illustrated London News* issue of 13 February 1847, in which Mahoney presents motherhood as a gendered expression of famine-suffering and passive helplessness, as becomes evident from Mahoney’s “Woman Begging at Clonakilty,” an illustration of a woman who begs to have her dead child buried (Mahoney 1847a, 100).¹² Mahoney declares that his detailed written and visual report primarily serves to bring “fresh evidence of the truth of the reports of the misery” in Ireland to the newspaper’s readers, but he also specifically appeals to the Christian fellow-feeling of his British audience. This becomes evident from a passage in which he portrays a victim of famine:

Thus a brother hath died – thus a Christian must lie! Horrible end and a harrowing tale, chill the strong heart – to strike revelry pale. No disease o’er this victim could mastery claim, Famine alone mark’d his skeleton frame! (Mahoney 1847a, 100)

As such, Mahoney’s coverage of the Great Famine employs a strategy that is remarkably similar to those used in reports of the 1861 Dutch floods: an appeal to the Christian fraternity.

This extensive attention to the conditions in Ireland in a London-based periodical can, of course, be explained by the fact that Ireland was directly governed from London, and

that relief measures to alleviate the plight of the starving peasantry were considered more a domestic than a foreign affair (Kinealy 1997). However, outside the British press, on the European continent, Ireland's dire condition also received extensive coverage. At the height of Famine misery, in "black '47," the French newspaper *L'illustration* repeatedly reported on the results of the potato blight. These reports are not accompanied by illustrations, and generally focus on shortage of food, death, and disease, heightening the readers' awareness of distress by a discourse that emphasises the idea of calamity. An item from 11 September talks about "le fléau," the scourge of calamity that wreaks further havoc, "propres ravages," due to an outbreak of diseases, "maladies particulières" ("Irlande" 1847, 48). Additionally, the article cites two French medical experts who refer to the British government as demonstrating a "plus coupable indifférence," "l'incurie la plus cruelle de la part de l'administration" ("Irlande" 1847, 48); terms which accuse the London administration of deliberate indifference and cruelty. These very strong terms that betray hostility towards Britain and its government are interesting in light of the at times tense relationships between France and England in preceding years, despite the development of an *entente cordiale* in 1843. Thus, coverage about calamities elsewhere in Europe seems to be infused with processes of national identity formation and transnational relations. Furthermore, it is not unthinkable that international competition between Britain and France as the most "enlightened" empires may have influenced this critique on Britain's neglect of Ireland in *L'illustration* as well. This is, for example, evidenced by the indignation about the situation in famine-stricken Algiers expressed in the *Penrith Observer* of 19 May 1868. The "shocking state" of the "native population, whose sufferings by famine are intense" and who therefore resort to cannibalism, are blamed on the French's inadequate government: "All business was interrupted. The police were powerless to protect the colonists who were themselves" ("Affairs in Algiers" 1868, 3).

That press reports on disasters taking place elsewhere are affected by processes of community formation at home is also revealed by the fact that it is especially newspapers in the Catholic south of the Netherlands that published extensively on Ireland's Great Famine. Newspapers such as the *Noord-Brabander* and *Provinciaal Dagblad van Noord Brabant en 's Hertogenbossche Stads-Courant* recurrently provided their readers with updates about the conditions in Ireland, the former almost on a monthly basis between 1846 and 1848. As an entry in *De Tijd*, a Catholic newspaper (1845–1974) published in 's Hertogenbosch and Amsterdam, revealed on 15 May 1847, the editorial board of the *Noord-Brabander* donated generously to the famishing Irish ("Aan de weldoeners van Ierland" 1847, 1). The fact that most of the famine-afflicted were Catholics who were furthermore under pressure from Protestant Evangelicals who sought to convert the famishing population by bribing them with food (Kerr 1997 3), may have given a further impetus to the *Noord-Brabander's* engagement with Ireland's situation, and its charity funds. In other words, one could argue that the south of the Netherlands and Ireland formed a transeuropean religious "imagined community," to use Benedict Anderson's term (Anderson 2006, 3), that may have initiated this charity initiative of the *Noord-Brabander*. What is more, this article (and the charity initiative it reports on) appeared within two months of Pius IX's official letter sent to Catholic communities worldwide which appealed for aid to Ireland from the Catholic community: "We urge you to

exhort the people under your jurisdiction to give alms for the relief of the Irish nation” (Pius IX 1847, n.p).

That this is likely is underlined by the entry in *De Tijd* of 15 May 1847, which represents the recent charity initiatives of the (Catholic) Dutch in terms of Christian compassion. The article talks about the “Nederlanders,” the Dutch, as a homogenous group without religious distinctions, who are furthermore praised for their humanity and Christian love towards Ireland, “menschelijkheid en christelijke liefde, ten behoeve van Ierland” (“Aan de weldoeners van Ierland” 1847, 1). At the same time, this spirit of charity is cast as typically Dutch. As the article states, the Netherlands commonly join in appeals for relief of distress: “In such a concert the Netherlands were always used to let hear their loud voice” (“In zulk een concert was Nederland altijd gewoon luide zijne stem te doen horen,” translation ours). On the occasion of Ireland’s Great Famine, the Dutch did not retreat in persistent, callous reticence: “now, the Netherlands would not keep stubborn and hard silence” (“ook thans zou Nederland geen stug en hardvochtig stilzwijgen bewaren,” translation ours). The response to catastrophe elsewhere in Europe is thus explicitly framed to construct a positive national identity that is rooted in empathy and generosity. Furthermore, the rhetoric used to evoke further sympathy for the famishing Irish is strongly emotive, by providing graphic details about the condition of the starved whose half-gnawed corpses lie by the roadside or are thrown into graves without ceremony, and by focusing on the most vulnerable in society, “grijsaards en kinderen,” the aged and infants (“Aan de weldoeners van Ierland” 1847, 1).

The tropes that are used, and that stress the most vulnerable classes, are highly reminiscent of the discourses used in, for example, the series “Sketches in the West of Ireland” from *The Illustrated London News*, published three months earlier. One can therefore observe a transnational register, in imagery and discourse, in dealing with the Famine in the press; a phenomenon which demonstrates what Stefanie Stockhurst calls cultural transfer between “communicative communities” (Stockhurst 2010, 21). In this case, the transfer includes both material (money) as well as immaterial (images, ideas) goods.

Irish case study (II): An Gorta Beag (1879–1880)

Interestingly, when it comes to the Irish Famine of 1879–1880, it is once again the Dutch Catholic newspapers and periodicals in the Catholic south which reported on the atrocities suffered by the Irish population: *De Maasbode*, established in Rotterdam in 1865 (e.g. 20 January 1880); *Helmondsche Courant* (e.g. 31 January 1880); and *Tilburgsche Courant* (e.g. 5 February 1880). While these newspapers and magazines do not call out explicitly for donations, they do address the inadequacy of current relief measures. As *Helmondsche Courant* reports on 20 January 1880, individual benevolence (“Particuliere milddadigheid”) and the inadequate means provided by the London government do little to alleviate hunger and distress: “schijnen weinig te vermogen tegen den verbazenden omvang van het kwaad” (“Politiek Overzicht” 1880, 1). Religious affiliation appears to inspire the extent of attention that is devoted to the starving Irish, as in the case of the Great Famine and the Dutch floods.

Furthermore, once again one can witness processes of transnational cultural transfer in the printed press. “The Famine in Ireland – Distributing Relief Tickets in the Turf

Market, Westport, County Mayo,” an illustration by the artist R. C. Woodville, first appeared on the cover of the *Illustrated London News* of 6 March 1880, and was reprinted in the New York-based *McGee’s Illustrated Weekly* in the same year.¹³ This is evidence for the strong interactions between illustrated presses on both sides of the Atlantic in general (Sumner 2010). The expansion of telegraph cables across Europe and the Atlantic was, as Catherine Waters observes, “undoubtedly one of the most significant developments for the transmission of news in the second half of the nineteenth century.” As a result, news and illustrations could travel faster as copies were struck off and could be sent by wire to papers and editors abroad (Waters 2019, 71–78).¹⁴ However, it is additionally likely that the huge interest in the U. S. and Canadian presses in this Irish famine may also have been sparked off by the massive influx of Famine emigrants to North America a few decades before (Kenny 2000; Meagher 2005) and the subsequent emergence of “transnational affiliations” (Faist 2000, 240).

Representations of this 1880 famine in *Harper’s Weekly* are moreover framed in two ways: first, by anxieties over radical Irish nationalism, “Fenianism,” within the U. S. and Canada. Thus, the article “The Distress in the West of Ireland” (14 February 1880, 109), suggests that the problems in Ireland, where famine was accompanied by agricultural outrage, reverberate in the United States:

In these villages the rapid increase soon reaches the limits of the food supply, and the surplus population floats off, to form a portion of the crowds of Irish in England, who will one day prove themselves as politically troublesome and unpractical as are the friends they have left behind them, or the Irish population in America.

The press coverage of the famine in the 28 February issue, including a cover illustration with the caption “the *Herald* of relief for America,” by Thomas Nast, strikes a different note. Nast’s illustration shows America’s generosity towards the Irish. American ships transport relief collected by the *New York Herald*, the primary coordinator of Irish famine relief in the United States, coming to the rescue of the starving Irish, whose distress is signalled by the toppled over Irish harp and the starving family seated behind the personification of Ireland, a young woman waving a flag for help. Nast’s cartoon presents the charity as an intrinsic American trait, suggesting that the country is not slow to respond to a call for relief. At the same time, the article in the issue of 28 February, “Ireland’s Possibilities,” displays a rather mixed attitude towards the starving Irish. On the one hand, the report stresses the necessity to aid the starving Irish, and it evokes the image of “helpless women and innocent children” on whom “the load of woe falls” most heavily as a strategy to elicit empathy (“Ireland’s Possibilities” 1880, 142). As such, the epitome of vulnerability that we witnessed in coverage of the Dutch floods and the Great Irish Famine is also present here. On the other hand, while the article states that “there can be no worthier opportunity of benevolence than that of sending succor to this unhappy nation,” it also attributes the country’s misery to “folly,” “faults so hereditary as to be ingrained”, and the peasantry’s inclination towards indolence (“Ireland’s Possibilities” 1880, 142). As such, while the article commends charity, it also resonates with a conventional, British imperial bias towards the Irish that is in line with the overall negative representation of Irish-Americans in *Harper’s Weekly* in previous decades: for example, Thomas Nast’s cartoon “The Day We Celebrate” (17 March 1867) had depicted the Irish as riotous and violent, thereby giving further expression

to anxieties over the Fenian movement that had been fuelled by the Fenian raid of Canada in June 1866.

“Ireland’s Possibilities” is accompanied by a series of engravings, one of which, “An Appeal,” represents the “indefatigable artist” who “found himself surrounded by a rapidly increasing escort of men and boys, who seemed almost to spring from the earth, their ragged garments streaming behind them, and their voices loud in the vociferation of their wrongs and hardships” now they had hardly anything to eat (“Ireland’s Possibilities” 1880, 142). Interestingly, this specific engraving was re-used by the Warsaw illustrated weekly *Biesiada Literacka* on 5 March 1880, to accompany the article “Głód w Irlandii” (1880, 156). The image is here contextualised entirely differently: the artist in the engraving is interpreted as the landlord to whom the tenants make their appeal, and the article serves to critique the agrarian policies of the English, and the detrimental land-owning system which makes the poor perish and the landowners live lavishly.¹⁵ This different focus is not quite unexpected in view of the problems with the landowning system that Poland was facing itself at the time and which involved hardship on the part of the peasantry.¹⁶ This suggests that the transfer of disaster repertoires, whether visual or textual, is “multidirectional” (Valsiner 2001, 41–42), for they acquire different connotations when relocated to different European as well as transatlantic contexts.

Conclusion

Having researched international media representations of nineteenth-century Dutch floods and Irish famines, what may we conclude about cultural repertoires of natural disasters and the ways in which they contest conceptualisations of Europe and its global contexts? First, the ways in which the press in various European geographical settings respond to catastrophes elsewhere may at first seem to confirm the idea of a profound nationalist agenda: after all, as we saw through the provided analyses, qualities such as charity or courage in battling floods are often represented as essentially national qualifiers. Disasters thus serve to construct what Joep Leerssen has called “auto images” and “hetero images” (Leerssen 2007).

A more profound investigation, however, reveals a more complex picture, which is often rooted in transnational political and social analogies, as well as the existence of underlying transnational imagined communities. Calls to donate to and sympathise with victims of disaster are motivated by the memory of similar suffering from disasters in bygone days, previously provided or received relief, an assumed immigrant readership, or a shared sense of religious identity that transcends national borders. In this respect, disasters cannot be studied out of their contexts of transnational charity politics which are implicated in the return of previously received favours or religious ideologies. Nor can they be examined without an awareness of the inherent fluidity of memory which, as Astrid Erll argues, can travel through time and space, “across ... and also beyond cultures” (Erll 2014, 29). As our examples revealed, it is the memory of past, analogous distress that partially informs calls for charity elsewhere in Europe, and generates a consciousness of shared experiences of suffering. The reprinting of illustration, however, often also resulted in a reinterpretation of the disaster elsewhere that fitted in with local or national political agendas and frames of reference.

Furthermore, our research demonstrated that the rhetoric and visual registers employed by the media across Europe and in the United States appeared to tap into a repertoire of recurring tropes and characterisations, such as the suffering mother and the afflicted infants. Further comparative research of illustrated periodicals in particular may broaden our comprehension of transnational registers that culturally shaped disasters. The fluidity and transferability of visual and textual representations of calamities expands Bo Stråth's claim that, indeed, "the definitions of the borders of Europe becomes much more problematic and contested," not only in "political-historical terms" (Stråth 2006, 3), but, we would like to add, in terms of cultural production as well. Further research on the circulation of texts and images about disasters across and beyond Europe will generate further awareness of the ways in which "Europe" and its transatlantic worlds can be looked upon as an extended territory and identity that unites communities across frontiers in unexpected ways.

Notes

1. The Dutch Crown Prince and Princess were visiting St. Petersburg at that time (see Beijer 1826, 204–210, 764). The same can be argued for the best-known flood of the Netherlands, the sea flood of 1953. Historians often only focus on the victims in the Netherlands and tend to forget that the death toll was equally significant in England and Belgium, where, respectively, 307 and twenty-eight people lost their lives. Furthermore, a ferry, which was on its way from Ireland to England, sank with at least 153 passengers of different national backgrounds on board. These foreign losses are, however, rarely mentioned in Dutch history books.
2. International networks of disaster charity predate the nineteenth century, as has been demonstrated by Boersma (2021), who revealed such networks with regard to Dutch calamities in the early modern period.
3. Reports were published in many newspapers and periodicals, including *Scots Magazine* (1 February 1820), *The Morning Post* (2 February 1820), *The Star* (4 February 1820), *The Morning Chronicle* (5 February 1820), *Saunders's News-Letter* (5 February 1820), *The Champion* (6 February 1820), and *The British Press* (8 February 1820).
4. *Saint James's Chronicle* (15 February 1820), *The Ipswich Journal* (19 February 1820), *The Champion* (19 February 1820), *The Evangelical Magazine and Missionary Chronicle* 28 (1820), 160–161; *The Gentleman's Magazine* (February 1820), 124–125.
5. A general description of the flood can be found in Quack (1861).
6. "Ce courageux peuple hollandais est bien digne de la sympathie des autres nations. Toujours en lutte avec la mer, il soutient avec une énergie que rien n'abat ce rude duel avec sa terrible ennemie" (translation ours).
7. These engravings are entitled "Inondation en Hollande; le château Ammersoyen dans le Bommelerwaard" (23 February 1861, 117) and "Une scène d'inondation à Nieuwaal en Hollande – un peu de possessions ont été sauvés des maisons inondées" (2 March 1861, 141). The authors wish to thank Thomas Smits for pointing these illustrations out to them. For the frequently occurring collaboration between local artists and illustrated newspapers abroad, see Smits (2020, 75).
8. *Westmorland Gazette* (19 January 1861). For other reports, see, for example, *Shields Daily Gazette* (17 January 1861), *Norfolk News* (19 January 1861), *Tablet* (19 January 1861), and *Dundee Courier* (21 January 1861).
9. All foreign donations are listed in Quack (1861, 44).
10. Interestingly, a letter-writer to the *Huddersfield Chronicle* similarly evokes the "anniversary of the never-to-be-forgotten flood which devastated the Holme Valley, and which elicited such an amount of pecuniary sympathy" as an occasion to collect funds for the "poor Hollanders" (2 February 1861, 2).

11. There is controversy about the end-date of the Great Famine. Some scholars state that the Famine ended in 1849, as this was the final year during which potato crops were affected by disease. Others choose the end-date of 1852, as the widespread hunger, disease, and massive emigration lasted till that year. See, amongst others, Ó Murchadha (2011), *The Great Famine: Ireland's Agony, 1845–1852*, and Donnelly (2002), *The Great Irish Potato Famine*.
12. Margaret Kelleher has called this the recurrent “feminization of famine” (see Kelleher 1997, 3).
13. *McGee's Illustrated Weekly: Devoted to Catholic Art, Literature and Education* 7 (1879–1880): 328–329.
14. For the role of telegraph cables in the transnational transmission of news, see also Kaul 2019, 177–178).
15. We want to thank Pawel Hamera for this suggestion and the provided translation.
16. For example, previously, Johann Georgg Kohl (1844, 79) had made various comparisons between the Irish and Polish tenant farmers in his *Travels in Ireland*, stating that “[t]he poor and ruinous aspect of Clare reminded me of the Lithuanian and Polish cities,” and drawing analogies between the Polish and Russian landholders and the landlords in Ireland concerning the relief they had to provide in times of famine (see also Healy 2017, 135).

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