

# Famine and ‘hongersnood’ as transnational memory: Literary legacies of the 1840s food crises in Ireland and the Netherlands

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## Abstract

The potato blight in Ireland (1845–1849) and the dire effects of the *Phytophthora infestans* in the Netherlands (1845–1847) have been investigated primarily through a socioeconomical lens. The cultural practices that have shaped and transmitted the memories of these famine pasts, however, require further examination, especially in connection to the Dutch potato hunger. This article investigates the cultural legacies of these two concurrent famines as both transgenerational and transnational forms of famine memory. Focusing on literary texts, and in particular children’s and young adult novels, as carriers of famine recollections, this study demonstrates recurrent narrative scripts which go back to earliest cultural representations of these hunger crises. While tropes, plotlines and characterisations are thus a form of transgenerational prosthetic memory, the cultural repertoires used to convey famine memory also appear to be transnational, in that Dutch and Irish famine literatures are structured around similar narrative templates.

## Keywords

children’s literature, cultural legacies, Dutch potato crisis, Great Irish Famine, prosthetic memory, transnational memory

On 20 September 1845, *The Buck’s Gazette* published an article on the ‘general failure of the potato crop’ across Europe, due to a ‘parasitical fungus’ that like a ‘plague spreads itself in every direction’. Countries in which the crops were badly affected, the article states, are ‘Belgium, Holland, France’, while ‘Ireland, which it was hoped would escape, is now it appears, likely to participate in the calamity’ (*The Buck’s Gazette*, 1845: 2). In Ireland, that calamity soon escalated into the

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biggest famine the country ever witnessed (Foster 1846: 8). This wide-scale famine caused by potato blight in Ireland during 1845–1849, and which radically decimated the country's population by 25%, has been well researched and documented over the past 30 years (Donnelly, 2003; Gray, 1999; Kinealy, 1994; Ó Gradá, 1993; Ó Murchadha, 2011).

However, while the outbreak of *Phytophthora infestans* in the Netherlands led to a potato rot which made 'only one third of the usual quantity [. . .] fit for consumption' (*The Buck's Gazette*, 1845: 2), the 'aardappelnoed' of 1845–1847 has been investigated less extensively, and primarily through a socioeconomical lens, by, among others, Richard Paping and Vincent Tassenaar (2007), as well as Daniel Curtis et al. (2017).<sup>1</sup> As they show, the potato crisis, combined with failed wheat harvests and very cold winters, led to high food prices and increased poverty among the Dutch population. Between 1845 and 1847, excess mortality was between 22% and 32%. Newspapers reported several food riots that broke out in Delft in 1845 (Van der Wiel, 1991) and in other larger Dutch cities in 1847 (Paping and Tassenaar, 2007: 165–167). In Groningen, five people were killed in these skirmishes (*Opregte Haarlemsche Courant*, 6 July 1847). These studies have significantly changed our understanding of the sociohistorical contexts of the Dutch 'aardappelhonger', but they have not engaged with the cultural practices that have shaped and transmitted these famine pasts, and that have thereby contributed to 'socializing populations' into a common memory culture (Ashplant et al., 2000: 8). By contrast, in the case of literary legacies of Ireland's Great Famine, huge strides have been made in uncovering older and more recent memories in fiction, poetry and drama. Christopher Morash's (1989, 1995) *The Hungry Voice* and *Writing the Irish Famine* offered pioneering examinations of early famine poetry and fiction by well-known authors, such as William Carleton and Anthony Trollope. Margaret Kelleher's (1997) *The Feminization of Famine* examines the various nineteenth-century famine writings by, among others, Annie Keary and Margaret Brew, while Melissa Fegan's (2002) *Literature and the Irish Famine 1845-1919* records and analyses an important range of the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century novels which are invested with famine remembrance. Marguërite Corporaal's (2017) *Relocated Memories: The Great Famine in Irish and Diaspora Fiction, 1846–1870* has identified recurring narrative templates and tropes in famine fiction till 1870, such as ruins, wastelands and ghosts. Her study, and articles written by Lindsay Janssen (2018 and 2019) and Christopher Cusack (2015 and 2019), has furthermore mapped out North-American literary memories of the famine. Apart from Margaret Kelleher who has conducted comparative research on narrative representations of the Great Irish and Bengal Famine within one single study (1997), recollections of famines in literary texts, as what Astrid Erll and Ann Rigney have called 'carriers' of cultural memory (Erll and Rigney, 2006; Rigney, 2004), have not been researched transnationally. This article will incorporate such an often overlooked comparative approach, by focusing on the most popular genres in which Dutch and Irish famine recollections circulated in the distant and in the more recent past: the first are short stories, novellas, poems and songs, often printed in periodicals and thereby widely accessible to reading audiences, in the wake of both famines. The second category is recent children's fiction.

The prominent presence of 1845 famine heritage in present-day youth literature may at first glance seem remarkable, but can be explained by the fact that in the case of both famines their presence in memory practices particularly gained prominence at a more recent stage. The centenary of the Great Famine was hardly commemorated in the wake of World War II, and the intensification of sectarian conflict in Northern Ireland during the following decades also implied a relatively low public profile for Great Famine memories (Mark-FitzGerald, 2013a: 62). By contrast, under the influence of the memory boom of the 1990s, the period since the sesquicentenary of the famine has seen an explosion in the number of famine commemorations, monuments, heritage sites, exhibitions and fiction (Mark-FitzGerald, 2013b: 2–5). As to the potato famine which afflicted the Netherlands and Flanders, this catastrophe has been regaining attention only very

recently: Erfgoed Fundaasje (Dagboek 19-1845, 2023) published digitised egodocuments related to the 1845 food crisis in the province of Friesland on its website, and the Canon of Flanders, published in May 2023, has started to include the potato crisis, ‘De Aardappelcrisis’ (Canon van Vlaanderen, 2023). As such, the potato famine in the Low Countries has long been what Jefferson Singer and Martin Conway (2008: 280) call ‘available’ rather than ‘accessible’ memory: that is, legacies that are present in archives, but less widely accessible in the public sphere. We are currently witnessing significant processes of retrieval through which this famine is re-entering public consciousness (Jensen, 2024: 174–180).

While there is quite a gap in time between the first corpus and the second corpus under scrutiny in this study, in selecting our case studies, we deliberately chose to concentrate on the above-mentioned two peak moments in the visibility of these famine memories: the period immediately following upon the food crises, and the period from the 1990s to the present day. This article will examine these early and contemporary literary legacies of famines, by analysing the texts from hitherto underexplored comparative, transgenerational and transnational perspectives. Astrid Erll (2014: 29) has famously argued that memory is inherently fluid, as it can travel through time and space, ‘across [. . .] and also beyond cultures’, and in that process ‘attain new meanings which serve present agendas and future ambitions’. The texts which will be analysed in this study demonstrate the *longue durée* of specific storylines and tropes that are used to convey famine memory, thereby underscoring the significance of Ireland’s Great Famine and the ‘aardappelhonger’ as transgenerational, ‘prosthetic memory’ (Landsberg, 2004: 3). Furthermore, the present-day children’s and young adult fiction that is discussed bears witness to the significance of the genre in transmitting ‘second generation’ memory (Ulanowicz, 2013: 9), that is culturally specific memories that are secondary responses to ‘previously articulated memories’ (Ulanowicz, 2013: 11).

The article will map out recurring plots and imagery that appeared in the earliest literary memories of both famines, meanwhile investigating how this famine memory has developed across time. Moreover, this article will examine these early and contemporary literary legacies of famines, by analysing the texts from hitherto underexplored comparative, transnational perspectives. The transnational is often defined as ‘sustained, cross-border relationships spanning nation-states’ or ‘interactions and cross-currents’ that transcend national borders (Vertovec, 2009: 5; De Cesari and Rigney, 2014: 7). We will identify another form of transnationalism in these Irish and Dutch literary famine legacies, in their shared use of recurrent tropes and plotlines surrounding suffering mothers, eviction and homelessness to remember famine atrocities.<sup>2</sup> In other words, as we will exemplify, one can speak of narrativisations of both famine pasts as both transgenerational and transnational. What is more, repertoires of representing past famines in Irish and Dutch contexts are very similar.

## Early legacies of the Great Irish Famine

As several scholars from memory studies have stressed, recollection involves ‘the narrative organization of memory’ (Wertsch, 2002: 57). Eviatar Zerubavel (2003: 7) argues that ‘conventional schematic formats . . . help us mentally string past events into coherent, culturally meaningful historical narratives’. This practice of narrative organisation relies on the emplotment of recollection in what James Wertsch (2002: 57) calls ‘schematic narrative templates’, and which will be interpreted in what follows as plotlines which involve a specific sequence of real and symbolical events in combination with the incorporation of particular settings and characters.

As discussed above, a considerable corpus of famine literature has been unearthed by scholars over the past decade. This section will only discuss a small range of examples in-depth, for the sake of laying bare plots and tropes that have become part of transgenerational famine memory, as well

as to map out significant similarities between Irish and Dutch famine narratives. A close look at the earliest literary texts on Ireland's Great Famine – from the black years themselves and their immediate aftermath – reveals four most prominent recurring scripts. One concerns animals, in particular the peasantry's loss of home cattle, which often has to be sold or put down as a way to survive. In Mary Anne Hoare's story 'The Black Potatoes' from *Shamrock Leaves* (1851), Thade and Jude Mahoney are forced to sell 'their goats and sheep . . . to procure food for their starving children' (Mrs Hoare, 1851a: 36–37). This tale resonates with the anonymously published *The Widow O'Leary: A Story of the Present Famine* (1847), a novella which details how the widowed Mary has to 'kill cow and donkey to survive' (1847: 5). Animals, however, also feature in a negative sense in these early famine texts. They are represented as relentlessly preying upon dead or famishing humanity. For instance, *A Tale of the Irish Famine in 1846 and 1847* by 'Ireland' (1847: 18) describes how corpses of the famished are 'in frightful fragments dragged by ferocious dogs from beneath the earth where they had been so recently and so hastily buried'.

A second recurring template features a family's displacement from the home, and its subsequent homelessness and demise. In *The Widow O'Leary*, Mary, who lost her husband to famine fever, also has to face the trials of hunger single-handedly, and she sells her furniture so that her house once 'remarkable for the neatness and cleanliness' is now an empty, unhomey shell, deprived of 'its brightly blazing fire, its well scoured chairs and tables, cleanly swept floor, and above all, the dresser' (1847: 10). In a similar fashion, Mrs Hoare's (1851b: 210) '*A Sketch of Famine*' portrays how the widow Sullivan and her children have to part with 'their little articles of furniture, and then their clothes', until 'nothing was left in the house save a bundle of straw and a few sods of turf'.

In both texts, the parting with possessions is the sad prelude to the family's fruitless quest for shelter and food, while one by one its members perish with hunger. In *A Tale of the Irish Famine in 1846 and 1847*, homeless Honour McCarthy in vain seeks shelter in a ruined chimney against the cold, and clasps the 'lifeless forms' of her children to her heart and dies (Ireland, 1847: 26). In 'The Black Potatoes', Jude Mahoney and her offspring 'set out on their mournful journey' through the country in quest for food, and after having lost several of her young ones, Jude passes away herself (Mrs Hoare, 1851a: 41). Moreover, *Poor Paddy's Cabin; or Slavery in Ireland* by 'An Irishman' (1854: 13) also recollects the famine through the image of a desolate, bereaved mother, unable to feed her infants: 'a recently confined woman whose infant lies "dead near her in the bed; it had been lying there dead three days; her old mother was there and two starving children.

This focus on vulnerable mother figures, a third recurring template exemplifying the 'feminization of famine' that Margaret Kelleher (1997: 9) has identified in the nineteenth-century writings, is often accompanied by the representation of these maternal figures as essentially selfless. In *A Tale of the Irish Famine in 1846 and 1847*, Honour McCarthy grudges 'every morsel that she put into her own mouth' (Ireland, 1847: 12), and the mother of the first-person narrator of Mrs Hoare's famine story 'Little Mary' always 'gives plenty as far as it would go' to her step-children, but

't was little she took herself. She would often go entirely without a meal, and then she'd slip down to the huckster's, and buy a little white bun for Mary; and I'm sure it used to do her more good to see the child eat it, than if she got a meat dinner for herself. (Mrs Hoare, 1851c: 87)

Finally, in early famine literature from Ireland, the memory of the catastrophe is often interpreted as strong critique of the imperial societal structures that aggravate the population's dire conditions: in particular, those invested with authority in Ireland as well as the London government. Henry J. Monahan's (1852: 267–268) novel *O'Ruark* pictures jurors at an inquest who are unaffected by the spectacle of depravity, the emaciated body of a starved man, that lies before them: 'annoyed at

having been taken away from their business at the fair', they order 'spirits and water' which they 'all seemed to drink [. . .] with as much pleasure as if a corpse did not lie on the table before them'. Lady Wilde's 'The Stricken Land', published in *The Nation* on 23 January 1847, directs its critique towards England. Her poem suggests that the farmers reap 'Golden corn for the stranger', as any food that is still harvested in Ireland is shipped off to England, on 'Stately ships to bear our food away'. At the same time, the poem implies, retribution for this inhumane treatment of Ireland will follow at Judgement Day: 'But God will yet take vengeance for the souls for whom Christ died' (Wilde, 1864: 14).

## Dutch 'hongersnood' literature: early examples

The number of early literary responses is very low compared to those written about the Irish hunger crisis. One can only find a handful of poems and one short story, for the majority of early publications about the Dutch famine consists of essays, brochures and short opinion pieces on taxes, high food prices and societal unrest. This can possibly be explained by the fact that there were fewer deaths in the Netherlands. Moreover, no mass emigration occurred. Nevertheless, these literary recollections of the Dutch 'aardappelhonger' are relevant for the transmission of Dutch 1845 famine legacies, because they were written by very well-known authors and circulated among a large audience, sometimes even for a longer time, in the form of popular almanac publications, and various republications in periodicals. In other words, many years afterwards these texts continued to feed cultural memory of the food crisis, in the form of memory once more made widely accessible through reprint. What is more, these early literary memories were sometimes also what Astrid Erll (2014: 30) would call 'plurimedial': for example, poems were set to music and taught to schoolchildren. As such, these early Dutch famine texts can be seen as examples of what Ann Rigney (2021: 11) calls 'cultural forms [. . .] creating memorability'.

In general, the literary responses to the Dutch famine appear to have been directed towards well-to-do upper and middle-class readers, and they are centred around three themes: religion, charity and social protest. The theme of religion is used in a very distinct way in these legacies of the 'aardappelnood' in ways that cannot be compared to legacies of Ireland's Great Famine. Basically, early literature of the Dutch potato famine tends to smooth over the suffering and many casualties by suggesting that achieving spiritual welfare is more important than a full stomach. This is, for example, the case in a poem by Nicolaas Beets, published during the severe winter of 1845, following the outbreak of the blight. This poem, 'Kerstavond 1845. Troost der armen' which could be translated as 'On Christmas Eve. Consolation for the poor', was often republished and even set to music in 1873, and portrays the miserable conditions of the poor on this holy day. The stanzas emphasise the destitute's lack of food: the boys have just had very little cole and porridge, 'haver-gort' (Beets, 1905: 298). However, the persona then quickly shifts away from this situation of hunger to convey a religious lesson: people who have little to eat will at least have the soul fed by manna from Heaven, 't Hemelsch Brood' (Beets, 1905: 297).

This strong religious orientation of the poem may be attributed to the fact that Beets was a Protestant minister. However, it is also in other early texts about the 'aardappelnood' that we see this message that spiritual salvation is more important than hunger, and that trust in God will put an end to the hardship of famine and failed harvests. This becomes clear from the short story 'Klaas de landverhuizer' ('Klaas, the emigrant') which was written by the Protestant vicar Cornelis Elisa van Koetsveld, and which was first published in *De Nederlandsche Volks-almanak* of 1847, a widely read year book of popular literature.<sup>3</sup> The story depicts the dire results of the potato rot for the inhabitants of a small city called Vreeborg. As a result of the 'aardappelziekte', the potato blight, prices of bread have gone up so much that the working classes have to resort to

‘paardenbonen en varkensmeel’, food for horses and pigs (Van Koetsveld, 1847: 176, 145). A father of six laments that his family is starving to death, while the labourers at the local copper-smith’s are worn and pale with hunger.

The prospect of migrating to United States is attractive to these hunger-stricken workers, including Klaas Borsje who has had a grocery for more than 30 years, and whose savings have evaporated due to the food crisis. Lured by stories which suggest that United States is a country of milk and honey, ‘land van vloeiende melk en honig’ (Van Koetsveld, 1847: 161), and further spurred on by those making profit from sending the poor on emigration schemes, such as van Bossen who works for the ‘groote maatschappij tot landverhuizing’ (Van Koetsveld 1847: 1856), Borsje and his family sell their home to get ready for the transatlantic crossing.<sup>4</sup> Yet the passage fares are too high, and Borsje’s wife appears to succumb to fever, the family returns to Vreeborg. They manage to repurchase their house, but are taught a moral lesson by the mayor and a church elder: emigration will bring further poverty rather than prosperity, and they should have been patient, and trust to God for bringing back plenty of potatoes and bread in due time: ‘Hadt gij hier uw’ tijd afgewacht, tot God ons weder aardappelen en brood in ruimte geeft’ (Van Koetsveld, 1847: 183). The story interprets the memory of the recent famine through a framework of religious doctrine: people should leave their fates in the hands of God and never question his bigger plan, even in times of hunger. Patience and faith are the only right responses to distress.

Even if this is the ulterior message of the story, ‘Klaas de landverhuizer’ also embeds the potato famine in the context of social inequality. Indeed, the story voices fierce critique of the fact that the higher classes are still having plenty to eat, while the workers are starving. The labourers are susceptible to rioters and inflammatory words in magazines, which increase their feelings that they are ‘slaven, die voor de rijken werkt [. . .]. De helft is voor de renteniers, die smullen, terwijl gij van de honger sterft’ (‘But you are slaves who work for the rich. Half of what you earn is for rentiers, they profit, while you die of hunger’; Van Koetsveld, 1847: 147).<sup>5</sup> This opposition between the starving and the upper classes reminds one of the contrast between the famishing Irish and inhumane, greedy English that one finds in Lady Wilde’s ‘The Stricken Land’. In fact, interestingly, like Wilde’s poem, ‘Klaas the landverhuizer’ suggests that the food that is still available in the country is shipped to England’s market rather than being used to save the people. The workers angrily observe that for the prime minister exportation of potatoes, wheat and meat is the main priority, even if this is against the will of the starving Dutch people: ‘gij hongert dood voor zijne vrienden, de Engelschen’ (‘you starve to death for his friends, the English’, Van Koetsveld, 1847: 148).

Another similarity that we can find between early Dutch and early Irish famine literature is the centrality of suffering mother figures to evoke sympathy. Hendrik Tollens wrote his poem ‘Een bedelbrief in den Winter’ (‘Begging Letter in Winter’, 1848) to raise money for the poor people in his village of Rijswijk, a successful mission as he managed to bring together 600 guilders for the starving of his town (Schotel, 1860: 259–260).<sup>6</sup> The poem explicitly encourages the middle and upper classes to donate for those without bread or shelter, suffering from ‘kou en honger’ (cold and hunger): ‘Geeft, burgerlui! geeft allen wat,/En geeft wat veel, gij rijken! (Give citizens, give something to all/ And give a lot you rich people, Tollens, 1848: 3)

The subsequent lines elicit the image of the suffering mother that we also find in early Irish famine literature: it depicts a forlorn mother, who found her infant on her breast, frozen to death (Tollens, 1848: 6). This character of the vulnerable mother figure therefore appears to function transculturally in famine memory, as early as the mid-nineteenth century, suggesting the existence of transnational memory templates to give expression to disaster (Corporaal and Jensen, 2022: 278–279). In addition, Tollens’ poem describes how a desperate father stole bread for his children and was led to prison, showing that the famishing resort to crime to save their families. This is a

template that we also see in early Irish famine literature, and that therefore appears to be transnational. For example, in Allen H. Clington's (1861: 297) *Frank O'Donnell*, the eponymous protagonist complains about the fact that the government by 'law will transport a poor man for stealing a sheep to keep himself and his family from starving'.

## Recent potato famine legacies: children's fiction

Today, the Great Famine continues to be remembered in various forms of fiction, targeted at different audiences. Graphic novels such as Damien Goodfellow's (2019) *Black '47* and Derek McCullough's (2012) *Gone to Amerikay*, as well as literary novels aimed for adult readers, such as Paul Lynch's (2017) *Grace* and Colum McCann's (2013) *TransAtlantic*, have transmitted and mediated cultural memoirs of the catastrophe. Furthermore, as work by Celia Keenan (2012) and Melissa Fegan (2014) has demonstrated, there is a considerable corpus of children's fiction written in Ireland and its diaspora from the late twentieth and early twenty-first century which makes the famine past accessible to present generations. The fact that, in particular in relation to Ireland's Great Famine, there has been such a remarkable production of children's and young adult famine fiction suggests that this genre functions as a primary medium to acquaint young readers with these famine histories, and to provide them access to memory cultures that are distant to them in time and space. Indeed, as Carrie Hintz and Eric L. Tribunella (2019: 276) assert, children's literature is a pre-eminent 'site for the transmission and construction of second-generation memory, as child characters and readers learn about historical events experienced by previous generations'.

Concerning the Dutch 'hongersnood' of the 1840s, its literary legacies mainly live on via fiction targeted at children, thereby revealing that the transmission of these famine pasts as 'prosthetic memory', to new generations and new communities, is an important driving force in today's memory production (Landsberg, 2004: 3). To research analogies between recent reconfigurations of famine memory in Dutch and Irish culture, in what follows we will therefore focus on the same genre, namely children's and young adult fiction. Central to our investigation here are the questions: In what ways do these recent works of famine fiction continue or revise narrative templates that we witnessed in fiction produced during and shortly after the potato crises? And can we witness recurrent transnationally used plots, character types and tropes that together suggest the existence of specific repertoires for recollecting hunger crises?

As the below analyses will reveal, these contemporary literary famine legacies directed at the underaged are indeed following a set of recurrent narrative scripts. These scripts appear to strongly borrow from existing repertoires of remembering famine, as they can be witnessed in the early famine fiction on the Dutch 'aardappelnoed' and Great Irish Famine discussed in the previous two sections. We will show that there are many similarities in the imagery and plotlines used by these modern children's authors to fashion famine memory, regardless of their own background and the famine past which they describe. In that respect, these texts bear witness to the existence of transgenerational and transnational famine mnemonic tropes and templates. In fact, it can be argued that these works of children's and young adult fiction are marked by what Anastasia Ulanowicz (2013: 9) calls 'second-generation memory' in that they respond to, deconstruct and revise these plotlines and characterisations. Bearing the similarities between the earliest famine representations and the narrative scripts of this recent children's fiction in mind, it is quite obvious that existing scripts are revitalised by present-day children's authors, who in many cases have done research before writing their youth novels. Ineke Kraijo, for instance, informs her readers on her personal website about the research travels she undertook to Ireland ([inekekraijo.nl](http://inekekraijo.nl)) for her famine novels. Marita Conlon-McKenna 'was always fascinated by the Famine period in Irish history and read everything available on the subject', according to the biography on the publisher's website. This

might also explain common themes and tropes that one finds between the nineteenth-century and the late twentieth- and twenty-first century young adult writing.<sup>7</sup>

This next section maps out these recurring transgenerational and transnational narrative templates in present-day children's and young adult novels, while also examining ways in which these texts deviate from existing scripts, thereby revisioning the famine pasts that they depict. Interestingly, these texts do so in very similar ways, thereby testifying to transnational repertoires in present rewritings of famine legacies. The texts about the Great Irish Famine that will be discussed date from 1990 till 2021, and constitute an essentially transnational corpus in that they comprise texts written by authors from Ireland, from countries marked by a significant Irish diaspora – Britain, Canada and the United States – and from the Netherlands. As to recent literary legacies of the Dutch potato famine in children's fiction, these have hitherto still been rare, as the legacies of this hunger crisis are presently re-merging as 'accessible memory' (Singer and Conway, 2008: 280). As a result, this article will only discuss Simone van der Vlugt's *Zwarte Sneeuw Black Snow* (2000), a historical novel for children which generated much (inter)national impact: it won the Flemish children's literature award 'De Kleine Cervantes' in 2001, and was translated into German by Eva Grambow, as *Emma: die Zeit des schwarzen Schnees* (2001).

### **Famine memory revisited: recurring and rewritten narrative templates**

It is evident that certain dimensions that we find in early Irish famine literature reappear in recent literary memories of the 1840s hunger years. One of these recurring forms of depicting the famine past in children's and young adult literature is through references of rotteness and blackness, both in a literal and in a figurative sense. Early famine literature from Ireland stereotypically portrayed the afflicted potato crops as polluted and sending forth a terrible stench of decay. For instance, Irish writer Richard Baptist O'Brien's (1856) novel *Ailey Moore* shows that all the acres are affected by a disease which has 'blackened' the 'poor people's food . . . in the bosom of the earth', while rotting weeds generate 'the odour of the charnel-house' (O'Brien, 1856: 206). In Marita Conlon McKenna's (1990) widely read *Under the Hawthorn Tree*, which was translated into 12 languages and which was the first book of her famine trilogy, the arrival of the blight is described in detail, as 'that smell, rotting, horrible, up your nose, in your mouth. The smell of badness and disease' (McKenna, 1990, 11). American author Tecla Emerson's (2017: 3) *Hidden in the Early Light: A Tale of the Irish Famine* likewise describes the suffocating, deadly air caused by the blight, which 'was heavy with the thick, odorous, gaseous stink rising from the fields. It threatened to choke all those who breathed it'. American author Patricia Reilly Giff's (2002: 40) well-known Nory Ryan's Song describes how the main protagonist Nory and her siblings find the strong smell 'coming in waves on the wind'.

What one sees is that a typical image from early fiction about Ireland's Great Famine is recalled in recent literature which remembers this hunger crisis, functioning as a transgenerational famine trope. In addition, this trope of black, stenching crops features in children's literature by writers from Ireland (McKenna) and the United States (Giff and Emerson), thereby demonstrating that this is a transnational 'figure of memory'.<sup>8</sup> This impression is further confirmed when we look at *Het zwarte jaar* (2020) a novel about the Great Irish Famine written in Dutch by Ineke Kraijo, who had lived in Ireland and who had previously published two historical young adult novels set during and immediately after An Gorta Mór: *Kate* (2012) and *Rose* (2013). In *Het zwarte jaar*, all the misery for Nora's family starts with the failed potato harvest, which is described as stinking black gunk

instead of firm tubers: ‘Vader trok stinkende, zwarte smurrie uit de grond in plaats van stevige knollen en sindsdien is er honger en ellende’ (‘Father pulled out stinking black gunk instead of firm tubers, and since then there was hunger and misery’; Kraijo, 2020: 10). As this passage indicates, the image of black, stinking crops has also ‘travelled’ over time and space, to appear in a Dutch young adult novel about the Great Famine.

Yet, the associations between the European-wide potato infections and these images of ‘blackness’ also extend to Dutch fiction of the ‘aardappelnoed’. This becomes evident from Simone van der Vlugt’s (2000) *Zwarte sneeuw*. The colour black in the title alludes to the harsh realities of working in the mines in Kerkrade, Southern Limburg, an experience that Emma and her family undergo to survive the harsh times. Previously, the family is evicted from their small-holding farm because they could no longer pay the rent as a result of their diseased crops. The misery that descends over them when their crops are lost is described as a black cloud of depression (‘zwarte wolk van neerslachtigheid’): a phrase which connects the literally blackened crops with a figurative sense of black doom (van der Vlugt, 2000: 5).

Interestingly, there are additional recurring templates shared by these texts which remember the Irish and Dutch famines, and which go back to early literary representations of the Dutch and Irish potato famines. As we saw, in these texts animals underline family decline, and, as ‘Klaas de landverhuizer’ illustrates, human beings are reduced to the state of animals themselves when having to resort to animal feed. In recent famine fiction for children, we see that animals play three significant roles. First, like in early Irish famine fiction, we see that the families depicted in these novels have to eat or sell their domestic cattle to survive, or that these animals are confiscated from them by landlords and their agents. In *Zwarte sneeuw*, the Dutch families are evicted from their home when they fail to pay their rent, and their animals are to be left behind with the land agent when they hit the road. In Giff’s novel, Nory has to take their pig Muc to the harbour, joining a ‘long line of people [. . .] leading animals’ to a ship bound for England, as a way to compensate for arrears in rent. Losing their animals means losing food to the cottiers, the ship being filled with ‘food that was going away from us forever’, as their cattle are ‘English animals now, not Irish’ (Giff, 2002: 101, 104). In Emerson’s (2017: 30) narrative, the famine-stricken family’s emaciated cow can no longer supply milk, so the father decides to slaughter it, ‘sharing as was customary the little they could with their neighbors’. That animals die or are confiscated, means an important resource for survival is lost to the children characters in these novels. This is, for example, the case in *Nory Ryan’s Song*, when the cow of the elderly Anna, who keeps her severely weakened younger brother Patch alive by the few drops she gives, is taken away by the landlord. The fact that people have to eat their own cattle or that these beasts are appropriated leads to a landscape from which every traces of animal life seem to have disappeared, Kraijo’s novel implies. When Nora walks the long way to Castlebar to look for her father, she notices how silent the scene is. Whereas during a past journey to the town, she had heard sheep bleat and cows moo, now she cannot even hear birds sing: ‘In de verte had ze schapen horen blaten en koeien horen loeien. Vandaag hoort ze zelfs geen vogels fluiten’ (‘In the distance she had heard sheep bleating and cows lowing. Today she doesn’t even hear birds chirping’, Kraijo, 2020: 17). This scene strongly resonates with plotlines used in early Irish famine fiction, as Marguérite Corporaal also shows in chapter 4 of *Relocated Memories* (2017: 128–131). For instance, in Dillon O’Brien’s (1866: 214) Irish-American novel *The Dalys of Dalystown*, the main protagonist Henry Daly returns from United States to famine-stricken Ireland to find that ‘[n]ot a living thing was to be seen in the fields or along the road he traveled’.

While animals thus function as essential to humanity’s survival, they also figure as ‘enemies’ to the famishing in that they are held more dear than the rural population by the landlords, or in that they are attacking the skeletal protagonists wandering by the road because they are ravenous with hunger themselves. In McKenna’s novel, the three siblings Eily, Michael and Peggy, whose parents

are down at the relief road works, decide to walk to and look for shelter from their great aunts Nano and Lena in Castletaggart. During the arduous journey, young Peggy is attacked by a troupe of starving dogs who literally try to gnaw the flesh off her bones: 'She pushed it off, but it sank its jaws into her arm and started to drag the limb back and forth as if trying to pull the bone from its socket' (McKenna, 1990: 11). This representation of the famine past harks back to early Irish famine fiction: for example, in William Carleton's (1852: 138–139) *The Squanders of Castle Squander*, a hastily buried corpse of a famine victim is soon to be torn apart by ravenous dogs: 'Here and there an arm; in another place a head (half-eaten by some famished mongrel, who had been frightened from his prey), or a leg, dragged partially from the earth, and half-mangled, might be seen'. As we have seen, many early texts about Ireland's famine and the Dutch potato famine show mothers and their children wandering around, with no prospect of food and shelter. All children's and young adult novels discussed here also feature vulnerable mother figures, within the plotline of a long walk. In Norah McClintock's (2012) Canadian children's novel, *A Sea of Sorrows*, which is written in the form of a diary by the young girl Johanna Leary, one can read that Johanna's family has to cover a very long track to a ship that may take them to Canada. Johanna's feet are 'sore, my legs ache and my stomach growls like a wild beast', as they have to walk for days on end without food (McClintock, 2012: 5). In other works of recent famine fiction, the children characters have to take to the road, usually looking for relatives who can help them now that their parents' location is unknown, or a parent has died. In the same way that McKenna's child protagonists walk a long distance to reach their mother's aunts, Emerson's Katy (or Kaitlin in full) leaves her brothers in a workhouse to climb the mountains to look for her grandmother's remote dwelling. Kraijo's heroines Nora and Anne have to cover a long distance to Castlebar, in search of their father. In van der Vlugt's novel about the 'aardappelnoed', the children of Sjeng Mullenders get exhausted from the long walk to Kerkrade, trembling with famine and looking pale with fatigue and hunger, 'spierwit van vermoedheid en honger' (van der Vlugt, 2000: 18).

We saw that early literature on the Dutch and Irish potato famine often features a vulnerable, emaciated mother figure who fails to nourish her children. This is also a recurrent character in recent children's famine literature. In McKenna's (1990: 15) novel, the family mother cannot keep her infant Bridget alive, and eventually the baby dies: 'Underneath the wrapped shawl her body was too thin, her skin white and either too hot or too cold to the touch'. Anglo-Irish author Carol Drinkwater's (2001) bestseller *The Hunger* includes an almost identical plotline. The mother of central character Phyllis McCormack is unable to feed her baby sister properly. Weakened by hunger and distress, she cannot produce mother's milk for little Eileen, who eventually also dies: 'Ma's breastfeeding Eileen again. There's no milk there, she says. It's only so the poor little mite thinks she's getting fed' (Drinkwater, 2001: 30). Emerson's (2017: 64) novel contains an equally poignant description of helpless, grieving mothers, 'weeping without sound, sprinkled through the crowd. Some held small children that looked like little sacks of potatoes flung over their shoulders, unmoving, more dead than alive'. In *Het Zwarte Jaar*, Nora and Anne repeatedly pass people who are beaten down by hunger, including a mother who is lying stretched out in the grass with her eyes wide open, while a toddler is sleeping with his head on her belly and his little thumb in his mouth (Kraijo, 2020: 18). Annekatrien in *Zwarte sneeuw* is the personification of the selfless mother: she divides the last bit of bread in seven pieces, so everybody can have a share bigger than hers, and she carries her youngest daughter Mayke during the long walk even if she is big with child.

This transgenerational character of the suffering mother finds an interesting counterpart in recent children's and young adult famine literature which cannot be traced back to earlier recollections of the 1840s potato famines in literature, and therefore appear later reconfigurations of famine memory: the resilient teenage girl who, as the elder sister in the family, looks heroically after her siblings and often leads them to a better future. For example, McKenna's Eily carries her seriously weakened

sister Peggy during parts of their long walk, and finds ways to nurse Peggy and her brother Michael when they get injured. Gill's (2002: 90) Nory Ryan is seen as 'the heart of this family' by her siblings, not only because of her songs but also because of her unending courage, a trait which makes her comparable to the mythological brave queen Maeve. Emerson's (2017: 10) heroine Katy, seen by her father as an 'Irish fairy', 'was ahead of her age and well aware of what was ahead for them' at the age of 16. She looks after her brothers and baby sister after their mother's death, having to make difficult decisions about leaving her brothers in the workhouse, and barely making the journey uphill to her grandmother's house to bring Molly in safety. We see similar character types in the famine fiction written by the two Dutch authors. Kraijo's Nora shows determination and strength when her famishing sister Anne loses courage, and nearly perishes with starvation. She realises that she is the elder sister and should maintain her composure even if she feels helpless herself (Kraijo, 2020: 21). Fourteen-year-old Emma in *Zwarte sneeuw* is the only one of the children who does not complain about hunger during the long foot journey to Kerkrade, even if famine gnaws at her stomach (van der Vlugt, 2000: 14). In fact, she admonishes her siblings not to moan and walk on. These strong young female protagonists who feature in recent children's famine fiction without exception are role models that today's young readers may be able to identify with; even more so as the narrative is often focalised through these characters, and follows their actions and experiences (Altman, 2008: 15). At the same time, these female protagonists fit in better with current gender norms than with notions of femininity from the second half of the nineteenth century. This evolution in characterisation therefore testifies to the fact that 'collective memory can be revised and remade in response to changing social conditions and changing social imaginaries' (Rigney, 2021: 11).

Three other recurring themes and plotlines can be found in recent children's literature on the Dutch and Irish potato famines that hark back to the earlier famine literature. One returning theme, which we also found in Tollens' poem, is crime: the characters are robbed of their final precious belongings or money, or they resort to crime themselves as a way to avoid starvation. Giff's Nory Ryan is robbed of the packages with food she had bought by her earnings; in *Zwarte Sneeuw*, Emma's family is harassed by a man with a knife who subsequently steals their last remaining coins. In Emerson's (2017: 45, 100) novel, father Jaimie steals money from the Earl, even if it is punishable 'theft', and Katy steals an abandoned 'nursing bottle used for the lambs' to help feed her baby sister Molly. In *Zwarte Sneeuw*, the eldest son Volkert steals a loaf of bread, an act that is justified by the pater familias because the family needs food to survive their journey. In Kraijo's novel, Nora and Anne witness how a skinny man robs a dying woman of her possessions, while their father has been taken to prison for stealing grain, after he had previously been conned out of the money he had earned through hard labour, intended to buy food for his daughters. All novels present a dual perspective on theft: it is unjust when it befalls the main protagonists, but a legitimate crime to commit to save lives.

To the characters in these novels, a destination beyond the native village seems to hold out the promise for a better future. Giff's (2002: 2) Nory Ryan and her friend Sean dream of going to United States, and being 'free in Brooklyn', an opportunity that appears to be only open to Nory at the end of the novel. A sense of disillusionment, however, pervades Emerson's *Hidden in the Early Light*. Father Jaimie sails from Cork, because he believes that in the United States he will 'make enough money. Then I can send for you all. In America we'll be able to own land, you know that' (Emerson, 2017: 46). However, Jaimie has to do hard and dangerous work on constructing railways, and dies untimely, even if he manages to purchase two fares from Ireland to United States for his sons. Katy, however, strongly prefers to stay in Ireland, 'where I belong. I'm Irish and I always will be. My place is here. This is my country, I can't leave' (Emerson, 2017: 148). The novel appears to privilege staying home to emigration, in a way similar to the earlier discussed *Klaas de landverhuizer*.

Finally, we see tensions between classes and ethnicities in these recent works of children's and young adult fiction, in the same way as these figure in early famine literature. In *Zwarte sneeuw*, the family cannot count on the compassion of the more well-to-do citizens of Spekholzerheid, who look at them with distrust. Even the local baker looks uninviting, with his arms crossed over his chest (van der Vlugt, 2000, 18). McKenna (1990: 138) addresses social inequality: her novel indicates that the poor walk, while ladies drive around in carriages; the majority of the population perishes with hunger while the rich have gardens 'full of cabbages and caulies and carrots and onions and big things of corn and huge marrows', as Peggy discovers. In *Nory Ryan's Song*, there is a big contrast between the landed families and the starving tenantry. While Nora and her family are on the brink of starvation, Lord Cunningham's wife wears 'a brooch and rings sparkling as she moved', and sits in a tea-room, 'holding a thick piece of brack to her mouth' (Giff, 2002: 111). A similar disregard for the distressed poor can be found among the rich in *Het zwarte jaar*: an elegant lady wearing a hat turns away from Nora, and flees into the nearby bakery, as a way to avoid her (Kraijjo, 2020: 20).

The novels about the Great Irish Famine, moreover, show frictions between the starving Irish and the English, just as early literary legacies of the Great Famine did. McKenna's (1990: 103) *Under the Hawthorn Tree* features a desperate old man who resents the fact that 'the hunger is upon' them, while food is exported to observe trade regulations: 'our food is being sent away, grown in Irish soil to feed English bellies, while ours are empty and our people starve and die'. The same point is made in Drinkwater's (2001: 31) *The Hunger*: in her diary Phyllis remarks that 'tons of food are being exported from Ireland' for the English market. This image of colonial parasitism at the expense of the starving indigenous population also recurs in Kraijjo's Dutch novel. John Reilley expresses his antagonism towards the English who, in his view, may even have poisoned the potatoes with the blight to kill the Irish, and who have made the Irish slaves in their own land: 'Ze hebben ons slaven gemaakt in ons eigen land' (Kraijjo, 2020: 54). They have to give wheat away, as rent, to the landlord who resides in England. Reilley's claims are quite radical, and are further nuanced later on in the novel when an English soldier gives his raisin bread to Anne. Nonetheless, Reilley's point that the English claim money from the Irish to live on their own land is foregrounded, and bears strong resemblance to the statement made by Granda in *Nory Ryan's Song*:

That is our land, our Irish land. Our stream and our fish. Cunningham, a man who comes once a year, has it all by the terrible might of the English [. . .] We are paying rent on land that truly belongs to us. (Emerson, 2017: 14)

While the theme of imperial wrongs is already prevalent in early famine literature, it has an even stronger presence in contemporary children's and young adult fiction.

## Conclusion

Early as well as recent literary legacies of the Irish and Dutch famines show that narrativisations of the past are both transgenerational and transnational. Recurring templates in the nineteenth-century Irish and Dutch literature are vulnerable mother figures and a strong critique on societal structures. These are, however, embedded in national contexts: in Irish famine literature this criticism is mainly directed against English imperialism, while Dutch writings about the 'aardappelnood' primarily concern the exploitation of workers. Another difference between these early famine legacies is the strong Dutch focus on religious salvation: no matter how difficult the circumstances are, the authors repeatedly emphasise the necessity for the stricken people to accept their fate. Dutch

citizens were even explicitly warned against emigration, while Irish famine texts suggest staying home is impossible: displacement and homelessness are inevitable ills.

In present-day children's books on the Dutch and Irish potato famines, the two repertoires of representation become more similar: we find analogous images, tropes, discourses and plotlines. Although this transnational register of shaping famine memory may partially be attributed to the fact that Dutch author Kraijo travelled to Ireland to study the Great Famine's heritage there, the overall similarities in narrative 'scripts' (Frawley, 2012: 9) are striking. In addition, as the contemporary texts studied in this article all belong to the same genre of fiction for children, it could even be argued that we witness a specific generic memory of famines that may account for all these analogies. Further research into the narratives used to model European famine pasts, across national borders as well as boundaries of genre, may yet reveal more common discourses of memory.

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## Notes

1. The word 'aardappelnoed' is used in contemporary news sources, for example *Drentsche Courant* (7-11-1845) and *Vlissingsche Courant* (17-11-1845).
2. Corporaal and Jensen (2022) have also argued that a transnational approach in disaster studies opens up new vistas.
3. The text was later republished in C.E. van Koetsveld, *Godsdienstige en zedelijke novellen*, 1–38. Schoonhoven: S.E. van Nooten; 's-Gravenhage: K. Fuhri. That is why we know that the mysterious author signing the story as K\*\* .S\*\*\* in the almanac was the well-known author of religious fiction.
4. Brochures encouraging emigration were indeed published during the years of the Dutch potato famine, such as Brummelkamp and van Raalte (1846).
5. All translations of originally Dutch texts to English are ours.
6. Tollens' 'Begging Letter' is up till today considered to be exemplary for his charity activities (see Mathijssen, 2002: 224–26).
7. See the webpage of the publisher on the author and resources of *Under the Hawthorn Tree*: <https://obrien.ie/under-the-hawthorn-tree> (accessed 17 July 2024).
8. For the well-established term, see Assmann (1995).

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