

BOOK REVIEWS

Famine in European History. Ed. by Guido Alfani and Cormac Ó Gráda. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge [etc.] 2017. xi, 325 pp. Maps. £69.99. (Paper: £23.99).

In the autumn of 2017, an exhibition dedicated to the Finnish famine of the 1860s was opened in the Irish National Famine Museum at Strokestown Park House. By being located in a museum dedicated to the Great Irish Famine of the late-1840s, the exhibition, curated by Andrew Newby, presented visitors with a rare opportunity to consider one major European famine in the light of another significant demographic crisis. This initiative was all the more innovative in presenting this rare opportunity to members of the public. The historiography of famines in the European past has been limited in its focus, the editors of *Famine in European History* correctly note, to particular regions (usually kingdoms and nation states) and specific events; this volume, therefore, breaks new ground in presenting a comparative perspective on famines throughout the European continent from the Middle Ages to the twentieth century. Nine chapters present case studies of the history of famine in European regions, each adopting a similar structure in chronicling the prime events of subsistence crises, as well as their causes and consequences, while the volume commences with an overview chapter setting out the rationale for the project and its methodology, and concludes with an analysis of European famines during the two world wars.

The contributors adhere to the definition of famine set out by one of the volume's editors, Cormac Ó Gráda, in an earlier work: "[F]amine refers to a shortage of food or purchasing power that leads directly to excess mortality from starvation or hunger-induced diseases" (p. 2). This definition reflects the volume's focus on famine as a killing event and, inevitably, the debate between the Malthusian emphasis on food production and Amartya Sen's "entitlements approach" to famine history is discussed by the editors. Throughout, the volume is grounded in extensive data analysis, drawing on time series of deaths / burials and the prices of wheat and other foodstuffs. However, Richard Hoyle, in his chapter on Britain, is careful to stress that one year of high food prices, signifying a shortage, does not imply famine – rather, two successive years of high prices produce famine, in the second year. During the first year of dearth, the population could fall back on stocks of food, monetary savings, and even bodily fat, while such resorts were depleted or significantly reduced by the second year.

The essay on Italy, by Guido Alfani, Luca Mocarelli, and Donatella Strangio, observes that the worst plagues occurred during periods of climatic instability, such as the Black Death of 1347–1348 and the epidemic of 1629–1630; in the nineteenth century, the Tambora volcanic eruption of 1815 gave rise to the "Year without Summer" (1816), known in parts of Europe as the "Year of the Beggars", the 1816–1819 typhus fever pandemic, and also the beginnings of the cholera epidemic that made its way from the Indian subcontinent before reaching Europe in the early 1830s. The role of war in contributing to famine is addressed by numerous contributors, and receives a study of its own in the concluding chapter. Wars revealed the man-made potential for creating localized famines, in the case of sieges, or wider regional crises, owing to disruptions in the production and distribution of crops. For instance, the Milan food crisis of 1799–1801, during which wheat prices reached their peak

for the period 1700–1860, arose from the requisitioning of grain for the purpose of feeding the French army. Serious food shortage was commonly complemented by social upheaval, the disruption of normal economic activity, the spread of disease, and excess mortality, and wars tended to combine and aggravate these factors.

Continental European readers may be surprised to learn that the greatest famines of both the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries occurred in Ireland. In both cases, the famines, which arose from different causes, were part of a wider international crisis. The famine of 1740–1741 arose from an extreme lengthy and cold winter, which created famine conditions in most of Europe; yet, the scale of suffering was most strongly felt in Ireland, where 1740–1741 became known as *bliain an áir* (“the year of slaughter”). Given the paucity of demographic data for the mid-eighteenth century, excess mortality can only be guessed at, but historians have suggested estimates of fifteen to twenty per cent of the population (310,000 to 480,000 out of a population of 2.4 million). A century later, during which time Ireland’s population increased to just more than 8m, the destruction by a new disease of the potato crop, on which a third of the population depended for daily sustenance, brought about the Great Famine, killing one million people. The Irish catastrophe was part of a series of famines that struck northwestern Europe, in regions with high levels of potato consumption; yet, as with its mid-eighteenth-century counterpart, the famine of the 1840s caused unparalleled devastation in Ireland. In asking the important question of why the Great Famine of the 1840s was the last of Ireland’s famines, Ó Gráda points to the scale of emigration during and after the Famine – such that Ireland is the only European country with a smaller population in 2018 than it had in the mid-nineteenth century – the decreasing levels of small-holding, a decreasing acreage of potatoes, a more diversified diet, and more generous relief provision at times of crisis.

Among the most valuable rewards of this volume’s comparative approach is the reader’s wide-ranging view of the varied survival rates of primary sources from the Middle Ages onwards, and especially sources that inform us of the history of dearth. The volume abounds in fascinating, and surprising, insights into the disparate survival of sources. For instance, data pertaining to medieval and early modern crises survive in abundance for England, yet little is known about the 1794–1795 crisis in the Low Countries owing to the “complete disruption of public authorities and public records” (p. 140). Whereas Scottish parish registers are rare for the period before the mid-seventeenth century, unlike their English counterparts, Scotland is better served than its southern neighbour in respect of county-by-county returns of corn prices from the mid-sixteenth century. The absence of medieval administrative sources in Nordic countries is mitigated by the use by Martin Dribe, Mats Olsson, and Patrick Svensson of chronicles, whose focus on weather and harvests illustrate the importance of these sources to medieval societies, and allows for the identification of years of famine.

An inevitable feature of famine is the increased movement of people both within and beyond regions affected by dearth. Urban centres and port towns invariably attract rural migrants desperate to access food, employment, welfare services, or long-distance transport. However, this is a theme that remains largely absent from this volume, albeit understandable given the editors’ thematic focus on scarcity and death. Nonetheless, the fact that a number of contributors briefly touch upon the topic, and also that particular nuances appear – such as the significance of the Old English Poor Law’s settlement clause, which “prevented the movement of people on the roads looking for charity of the sort still found in Scotland and France” (p. 158), and the striking phenomenon of de-urbanization in early-twentieth-century Russian famines – points to the rewards awaiting researchers willing to undertake comparative studies of migration during famines in European history.

The editors admirably bring together the work of eighteen scholars from across the world, whose research on famines covers the entirety of Europe across a millennium. The extent to which the authors adopt a shared approach to their topic adds significantly to the value of the volume, which, as the editors explain in the overview chapter, “has been planned from the very beginning with a comparative perspective in mind” (p. 1). One aspect wherein the historiographical coverage is uneven is in the authors’ analysis of the responses to famine in their chosen regions. This is regrettable given that the inclusion of dedicated sections on individual, corporate, and societal responses adds significantly to the understanding of famines in the respective regions. For instance, as outlined in Dominick Collet and Daniel Krämer’s chapter on Germany, Switzerland, and Austria, the impetus for famine relief in the early-nineteenth century was driven not by the state, but by religious institutions, charities, and benevolent societies, who ran soup shops and subsidized the cost of bread for the poor. However, societal perceptions of poverty and hunger were undergoing a steady evolution, as traditional notions of indigence and starvation as signifying moral failure were replaced with a wider awareness of the structural economic causes of poverty. Students of famine in European history, whether with particular interests in local instances or with an eye to wider cross-national patterns, will long owe an intellectual debt to the editors for producing this important volume.

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RAPPAPORT ERIKA. *A Thirst for Empire. How Tea Shaped the Modern World*. Princeton University Press, Princeton (NJ) [etc.] 2017. xiv, 549 pp. \$39.50; £32.95.

As a relative outsider with a preference for tea, I have always been fascinated by the British habit of drinking strong tea with milk and sugar. This odd mix has made tea even more popular than coffee in Britain, which is strange from a global perspective. If you are curious to know why “England” maltreats its tea in such a way and even revels in doing so, this is a book for you. However, the main argumentation of this book follows a different line: it ascribes a leading role to the main commodity under study, tea, in shaping the modern world. As the author explains, “By tracing the rise and fall of tea’s empire that stretched from western Canada to eastern India, *A Thirst for Empire* reveals the belief systems, identities, profits, politics, and diverse practices that have knit together and torn asunder the modern ‘global’ world” (p. 1).

As the title, *A Thirst for Empire*, implies, “consumerism and imperialism” were intertwined phenomena, meaning that although Western consumption is now ideologically tied to freedom of trade, in the past the spread of consumption was strongly tied to imperialism. This book argues that through enforcement and violence, “Empire” imposed itself on the wider world in the nineteenth century, but it also underlines how “irresistible empire [...] fashioned new wants, new identities, new ideologies, and new things” (p. 12). As such, the author argues that new drink cultures such as tea were consciously created through different knowledge systems, such as advertising, packaging, and branding. This book is a plea to