

A GEOGRAPHY OF FAMINE:
REFLECTIONS ON THE STARVATION OF TRUTH

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This essay takes us on a voyage. The journey is long and the seas turbulent, yet we travel no further than the self. To satisfy the intellectual need, however, our thoughts are woven through a format comprising an introduction, middle and conclusion. Despite the inbuilt requirements of this structure, it should not be conceived as an enclosing prison. Rather it must be considered as a cantilever, both open-ended and infinite. Thus this enquiry seeks not to limit us, because inevitably we are limited only by our own self-imposed constraints. Once aware of these limitations, we can learn a little by reflecting on the content that fills this framework. We move beyond it, however, only by seeking to bend the walls of our knowledge and through a fulfilment found in our understanding of others. For true knowledge should reveal to us the infinity of our ignorance relative to the self, and to others.

With this in mind we wish to impress the theme of famine on our thoughts. Paradoxically, the world carries many dualities; hunger does not merely derive from the struggle between princes and paupers. It mirrors also the interplay of certainty and ambiguity in the human condition. It forges in the mind images of light and darkness, lost and found. Ultimately, it challenges us not to choose between, but rather to balance the doubt and hope that battle within us.

“ . . . A meal was bought with blood,
and each sat sullenly apart
gorging himself in gloom
And the pang of famine fed upon all entrails
Men – died, and their bones were tombless as their flesh.
The meagre by the meagre were devour’d,
even dogs assail’d their masters . . . ”

(Byrne, 1980; 260 - 262)

Consideration of famine in Kerry, its causes and consequences, leaves us grappling with many deeper complexities. Furthermore, as outsiders, even our efforts to penetrate some of the external layers towards some fuller understanding of this catastrophe ensnares us in a web of perplexity. How can we communicate an experience we have never experienced, of a people whose lives are entrenched in a period which has been understood only through the pages of our own history – a history conceived from reality, but constructed through the perceptions of intellectual minds. Our own malnutrition, however, results not from neglect but from over-consumption of unquestioned knowledge. Still we continue to play around with facts that build like cholesterol around the heart, clogging the true source of life. In this instance we are inhibited from feeling the misery of death, of even one self-history born into this phenomenon we call famine. The body we draw from is diseased and the mind poisoned. Imperfection cannot breed perfection. Is truth just a myth? Or is truth no longer true, simply because we have misinterpreted it? (Anscombe, 1981).

The conscience, however, will not be suppressed forever but continues to irritate the discomfort that threatens to sicken the whole being. Perhaps we can bend the walls, maybe stretch the rigid falsities and for once, win one stage of the eternal race in which we compete. To do this we need to prick the morphined numbness of our thoughts and open one corridor of the self.

Do we expect to satisfy these aspirations? Can we hope to provide an answer to such questions? Or are we merely stating our desires and dreams knowing that they will come true only in the vaults of our own subconscious? Every dreamer receives a rude awakening, yet without a dream what have we to reach for? Surely the poorest of all men is not the man without a cent but the man without a dream?

These questions are both paradoxical and rhetorical, enshrining answers within their constructs. Our answers offer a mixture of ignorance, thoughtfulness, forgetfulness of evil, hope of good things and sometimes a sprinkling of ourselves. They bring relief from conflicting troubles. Yet we continue to retreat in fear from real honesty, afraid of discarding scholarly life as we have known it; even though the thread of true life has been cut and is ready to leave us (Erasmus, 1983; pp. 1 - 30).

On the surface the very least that is asked of us here is to seek understanding of a county called Kerry, sinking with its neighbours into a sea of poverty. However, we have consistently floundered in misunderstandings. Whom can we blame for the disaster? A mutinous crew? Or the captain at the helm whom we have christened famine? This evidence demands a verdict, but let us proceed on our crusade without foreknowledge of the accused and the victim. Our desire for answers requires a

proper enquiry. The latter can only be achieved through understanding our subjects and the subjective being.

Firstly, therefore, it is necessary to reflect more deeply on the paradox of the self geographer – saint or scholar? Can we justify stealing this single entity of Kerry. A region boundless but in the rigid sense that we perceive it still circled by our own notions of county. Can man, in fact, be set upon a stretch of sand and ringed about with circles made by human hands? Are we guilty of using Kerry in this context for our own purposes? What makes it more distant or more of an area than anywhere else? Shall it be called a region, area, space or place? Are these concepts to be accepted or rejected? What can we understand by famine? How can we speak of a county so real, yet so abstract? By making it conceptual we allow ourselves to enter into Kerry. Perhaps, however, this conceptualisation finds existence purely within the creation of our own null hypothesis. As the facts stand we await judgement, guilty or innocent?

To a degree we can accept our use and abuse of the study area, and the various meanings under which it is classified. If one agrees, however, that the object and the subject are internal, just as the mind both perceives and conceptualises, then it is the apparent contradiction in the line of conflict that the truth lies. Thus for all intents and purposes, we can reject the academic process of classification and categorisation. These concepts are merely camouflages constructed from untruths because of our own failure to deal with what is true. As cowards we retreat and hide in such falsification.

On the other hand, as people, we live through language which is formed in part by such classifications. To the best of our understanding we exist because of our language. It is and permits us to see that it is, speech, emotions, feelings, movements of the body, heart, and soul. In the beginning was the Word i.e. the son of God. The Word dwelt amongst us. This is the meaning of our existence. Even if we reject the religious connotations, we are forced into the acceptance that the Word was, is, will be, finitely and infinitely what we are.

Understanding this does not involve moving on to seek further understanding by breaking language into a million atoms. Dissecting and micro-analysing each splinter provides us with emptiness. Fragments can only be understood together within the whole. If we dismember the body we lose the completeness. The thought is simple and obvious, yet in many respects apparently difficult and contradictory. De-construct our language and we are left with pieces totally incomprehensible. For the only means of de-construction is to explode apart. To sever the links is the very means by which we ignore the true relationship. The consequence is destruction. Who will put Humpty Dumpty back together again?

Concominantly the concepts of area and region are not rejected. It is only as human tools that they become riddled with faults. In this context, they are incomplete, but remain the most perfect we can ever have in this, the best of all possible worlds. Consequently, we acquire knowledge firstly by establishing boundaries and then by crossing them. Subsequently it is as necessary as it is inhibiting to categorise (Olsson, 1978). Our consolation is as obvious as it is simple. It is not speech itself that matters, but what it is telling us. Let us not worry, therefore, about entities such as space and time. It is not in these that we shall find our dignity. Rather, look beyond to the ordering of thought. I can gain nothing further by owning territory. In one point of space, the universe embraces me and wallows me up like a mere point. In thought I embrace the universe.

What I write is self-destructive. Once written, it becomes exposed and decays. We can never fully reformulate its true meaning from the original thought. Its creative source can never be re-assembled. Nonetheless, it is in turn procreative, helping us towards understanding of ourselves. For who among us can deny that what we watch melt into a shapeless lump of wax is not the same candle (Descartes, 1985, pp. 102 - 112). Likewise, expression of thoughts subjects them to the heat of reason. They change but are still the same thoughts.

Do we depend on reason or imagination to formulate our verdict? Certainly O'Flaherty's book *Famine* (1985) reveals as such about the author's imagination as the peoples' lives he focuses upon. I refer to imagination in the context of a decaying sense. Both memory and imagination which are dependent upon experience fade with spatial tangible distance. Not in the geometric sense, rather in our efforts to link the growing extent of peoples' memories over an increasing expanse of time.

We are indeed inheritors of the famine and continue to make ourselves carriers for our ancestral memory as we search to fulfil our own personal hopes. What we preserve is a remnant but nonetheless the sole survivor of fact. Similarly, what is preserved from the written sources bears that essence. Yet we use the repeating evidence and experience of failure to chase shadows as we cling to ephemeral philosophies. The problem, however, is that our dreams of the present are built on our blunderous

collages of the past and on our images of the future. We become trapped in the external rationality of our own culture, seeking fulfilment from outside, embonding ourselves in an endless chain of life. No one can claim to move beyond it as every link is part of another. The resultant circle, however, creates constraints which in turn guide us to freedom. Consequently, we return to the fold and complete the force of circulation.

What I present here claims to be nothing more, or less, than the fruits of my own imagination, both rational and creative. Whatever else may be certain these are not. Call it prudence if you wish, but the image includes presumption and prediction of inherited and created experience and thought. The end product is my fancy. While the quality of production is always apt to be improved nonetheless, it does take me so far.

STRUGGLE WITH THE SOURCES, TECHNIQUES AND METHODS

How, therefore, should one begin and proceed to communicate the former experience of people through language? An introduction to the source is called for, including a vast range of reports and census data. In different ways these are utilised to fashion our historical lens. Frequently, however, they are used with the sole intention of uncovering facts to answer single-minded, research questions, relative to particular areas within particular time periods. What of the minds that compiled these figures? Can they be ignored? Their conception of the truth now in part form our utilities of interpretation. Between us the margin of error is great. Any message conveyed by fact, however, must be evaluated in terms of history, as the uninterrupted welling of life in a multitude of currents and undercurrents, which are formed by changing influences and various impulses. Yet, the unfolding of history has pointed to nothing more clearly than the constant conflict between what happened and what we conceive to have happened (Weber, 1948). Cumulatively, many sources relate the facts and details as coldly and matter-of-factly as some of us might indeed wish for. Who among us would not opt for the polished figure in preference to the ragged emotional experience, unkempt, rough and wild. But let us not reject what we have tamed. Our sources are perhaps distorted mirrors of truth, nonetheless they are mirrors. It is not the looking-glass that deceives, rather the eyes which look, presupposing what they wish to see. Come with me and enter the hall of mirrors. Make this a dialectic between three in one worlds – Theirs, Yours and Mine.

Together we try to pin down the abyss of Kerry. A county with more personalities than we could ever hope to grasp. More importantly, it was and is formed by people belonging to distinct communities in unique places. Yet through the process of history and an event we call famine, we are prone to squeeze the individuals of this era into one personage. Sealed and signed under a title with the name of pauper. Nobody can show concern for someone who lacks personal identification. I cannot know you if you have no identity. It gives you substance without which you are non-existent. Where is this personal introduction to be found? Reflection on the broader visions, seen on the accompanying maps, makes us realise that to a large degree they are mere designs. The masterpieces of our own art and craft, in many respects are evasive in their application. The problem is one of translation. How can we distil meaning from marks on a map? (Olsson, 1978; Smyth, 1985; pp. 1 - 20). Perhaps it is true that they can awaken our thoughts. Maybe even transfer our memories back to view the scale and nature of poverty. In honesty, however, the dilemma is blatant. Even while we try to shake off or remove the "shroud" of Kerry, we find ourselves smothered in constructs and concepts. We become engrossed in the Kerry Abstract, the people are lost in the duality of a finite extent of space, and the infinite expansion of thought.

Geometric representation, however, reflects the certainty we strive for. It is as essential to creativity as the insights we gather from ambiguous writing. Unfortunately, the former takes care of itself. With a growing assertiveness, it dominates with increasing stagnation the systems and bureaucracies of this world (Olsson, 1978; Arendt, 1958). We are forced, therefore, to press here for ambiguous diversity to express our inspirational uncertainty.

Thus only through the onslaught of argument and action on ambiguity can creative understanding emerge. Our ship remains afloat and from the depths of despair hope surfaces through. As reason and imagination engage in equal combat, we realise that one impression on the door achieves more than a million refusals "d'essayer d'entre". For the purpose of breaching a little of the meaning hidden within our maps, we can focus on the resultant patterns. Our picture is painted from many colours, tangible but also inspirational. Through these we can touch on realism.

ENTRANCE TO THE ARENA OF KERRY

Accepting that whatever has a beginning must have a cause, we will momentarily avoid attempting to penetrate the true cause of famine in Kerry. Thus we concentrate on wrestling with the effects as seen merely on the surface, but aware that famine in its truest form is imputed to us as a splendid testimonial to the greatness of civilised man. In the context of consequences, therefore, famine, a word which tells much but shields even more, revealed itself in town and countryside. With respect to these areas we can reflect on a number of issues highlighting the rapidly expanding poverty in Kerry of the mid-nineteenth century. Firstly, the towns appeared to utter but one voice as they personified a plague of narrow laneways creeping within and around every street. This malignant hunger spread a trail of destruction into the heart and soul of every settlement. Within each of these laneways, the statistics, although hiding much, permit us to grasp the nature of overcrowding and poverty on the roadways. Each area was submerged in a swamp of "valueless" mud cabins. Value, however, is not something that can be measured. Its meaning is far more elusive. Whether worth £1 or £100, each shelter and haven of despair was tagged priceless as both heart and home for the families involved.

This was the poverty we can perceive both coinciding and pouring into what one might call the upper class areas. The stark division, yet dependance between rich and poor highlighted one painful reality of famine. Let us not fool ourselves, however, with subtle class divisions. Survival for many expressed the only emotion worth feeling. While words express the power of emotion, pictures are also forceful conveyors of meaning. However, they are not ends in themselves. It is important to remember that the numbers involved in this phenomenon were far greater than ever recorded by census reports and other data. The different sources revealing varying degrees of poverty highlight this discrepancy (Moriarty, 1984). Consideration of at least some of these external, surface ambiguities helps us to close the factual margin of error, even if they fail to erase the wretched pangs of hunger. For instance, in the Kenmare Poor Law Union alone the 1,881 people recorded by the census in the official Workhouses falls far short of the many others sheltering in havens of poverty throughout the town during that period. If we are to succeed in drawing ourselves closer to the truth, even at this purely surface level, we must bear in mind that indicators, including the ten shanty-type Workhouses of Listowel, or the eight in Tarbert, were far more representative of the reality of poverty.

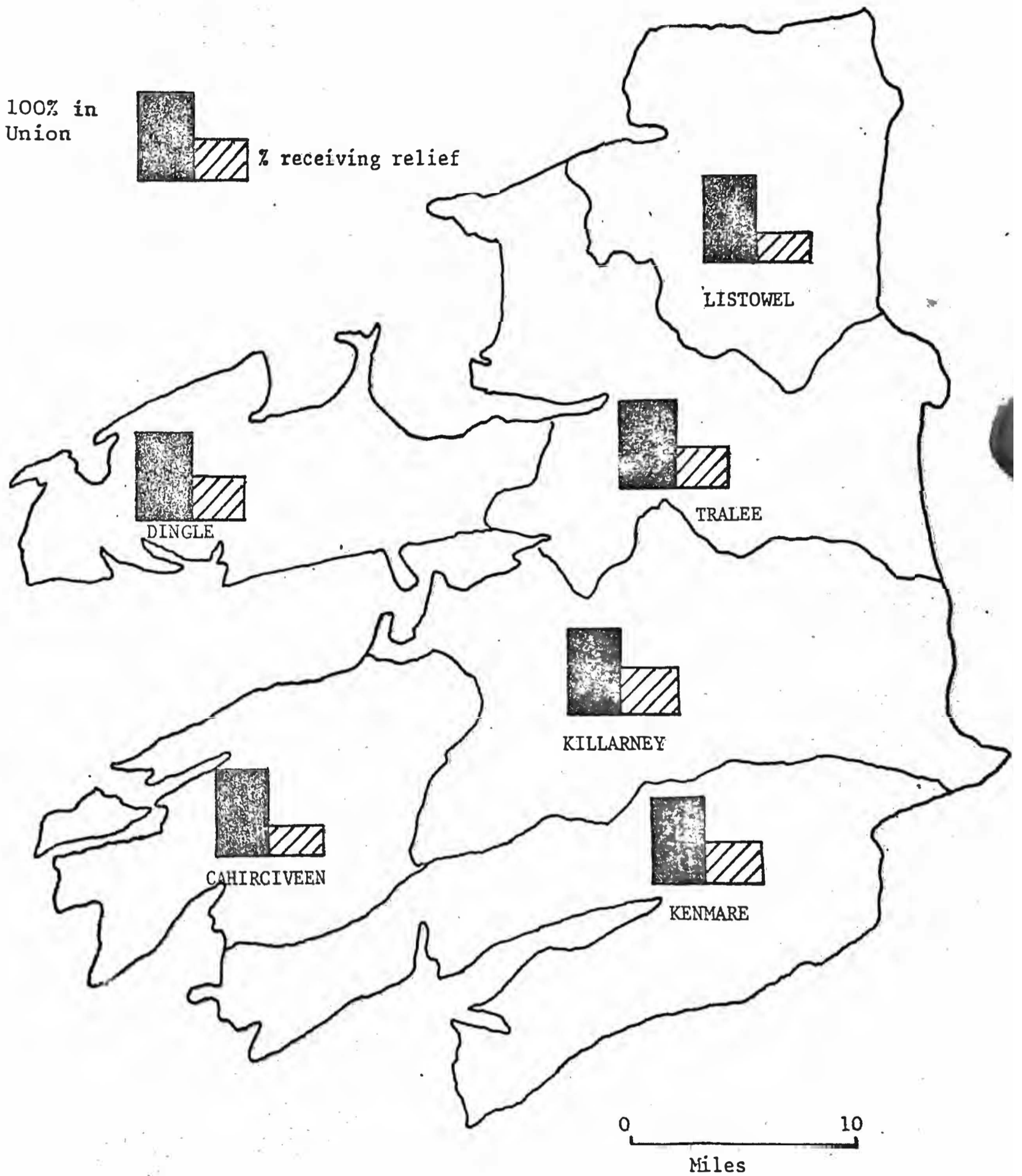
If we change our focus to the countryside, it becomes apparent that the situation, although different, revealed some similar consequences. Here extreme overcrowding and poverty revealed itself in the form of bloated clusters and terrible sub-division of property. The most severely affected areas were along the coast and in the major settlement centres. The maps partly represent this process. Thus we can allow these pictures to speak for themselves. As observers we can draw some generalisations, one of the most obvious being the close inter-relationship between town and countryside. The location of Workhouses, and the structuring of the poor law unions, formed the central positive magnetic force as the poor crowded for relief towards the towns.

However, who were the long-term beneficiaries of such relief. Paupers, landlord, church or state? In view of the roads, piers and bridges built by the poor, with much toil and little return, one could perhaps point to the state as glutton. On the other hand, the church must not be forgotten. As a structure it penetrated the people at their weakest points. There were both spiritual losses and gains for all denominations. For instance, the proselytising tendencies of the Church of Ireland helped to increase the Protestant fold. Bible schools and "soupers" became familiar phenomena of the period. Their very existence enable us to draw some conclusions on the nature of the despair that prevailed. Some of the lower-order powers deserve consideration also. These included pawnbrokers and other enterprising agencies. Clearly self-survival ruled the emotions of many at the time.

At the other end of the scale we are concerned for those who were starving. What did relief mean for this section of the population? The minute books provide some insight into the lives of these, both the lucky and the unlucky ones. In Kenmare we see something of the harrowing conditions that were endured. Here the fever hospital was overcrowded, containing at least four patients to every bed of straw and many more without. Those suffering from fever, dysentary, and measles were calculated at two hundred per week for March 1947. In the same month 1,153 people died.

These were simply the numbers involved. In this context we can deal with the masses in an abstract and detached fashion. However, has the Geography of Emotion expressed by the people themselves ever been considered? What was the real impact of the movement from the countryside to the town? What did death mean for the families affected? Occasionally, outbursts of feeling can be perceived. To quote an example, on one November 5th, a mob of starving labourers gathered outside

RECIPIENTS OF RELIEF, DECEMBER 1849

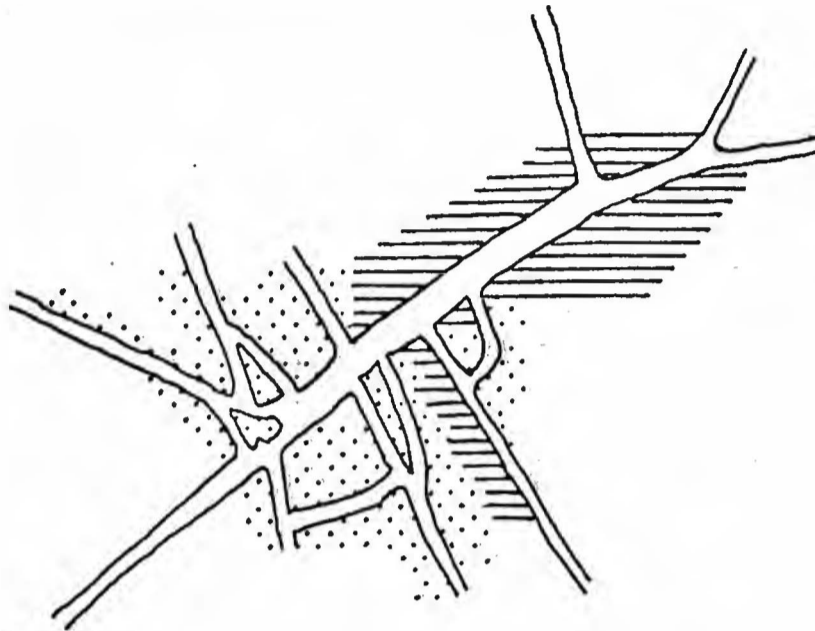
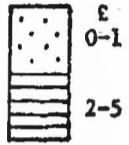


Source: Minute Books: Poor Law, Board of Guardians

Figure 1

VALUATION OF HOUSING IN CASTLEISLAND 1850

Average Value Per. Street



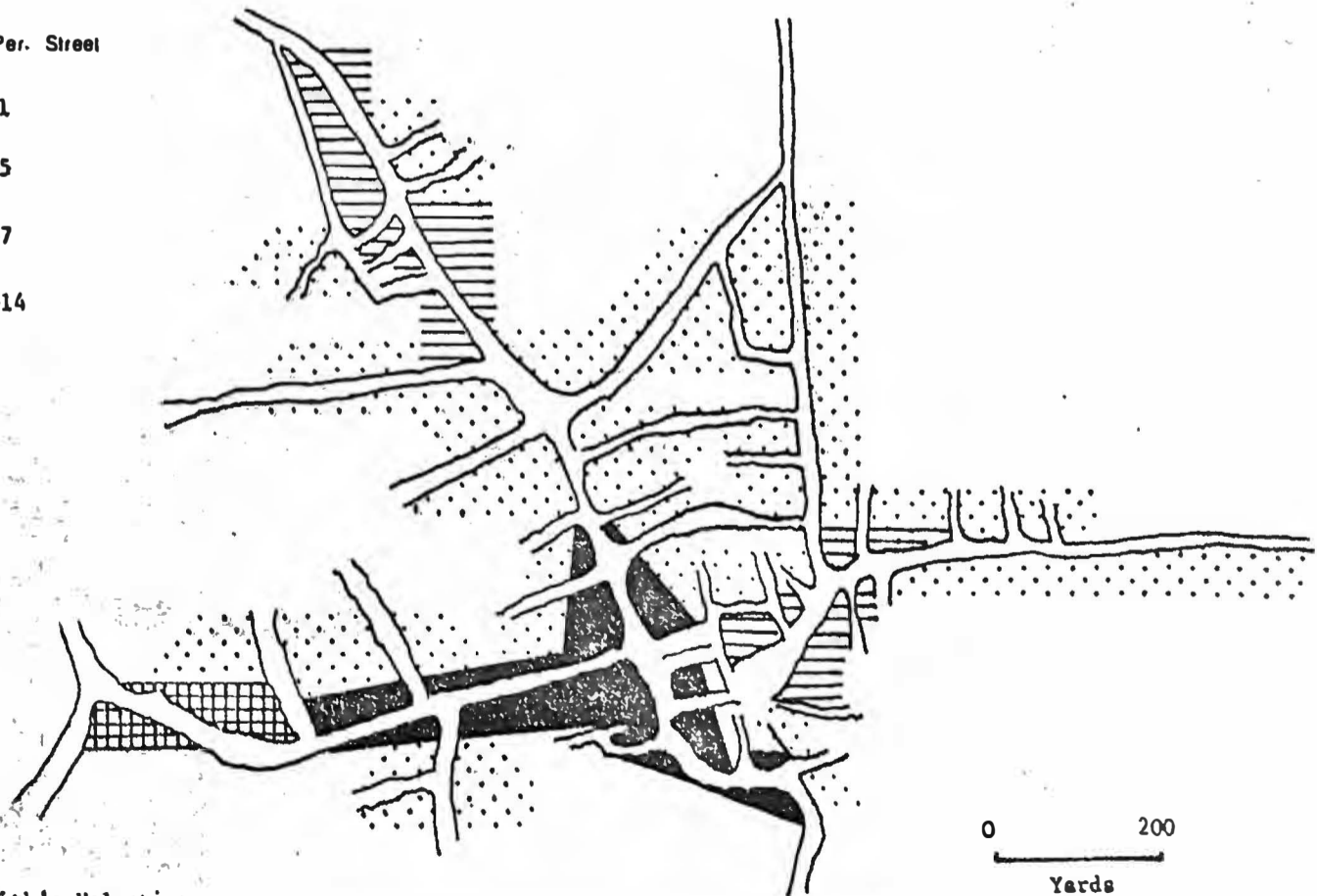
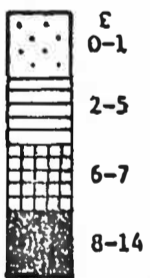
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Yards

Source: Griffith's Valuation

Figure 2

VALUATION OF HOUSING IN KILLARNEY 1850

Average Value Per. Street



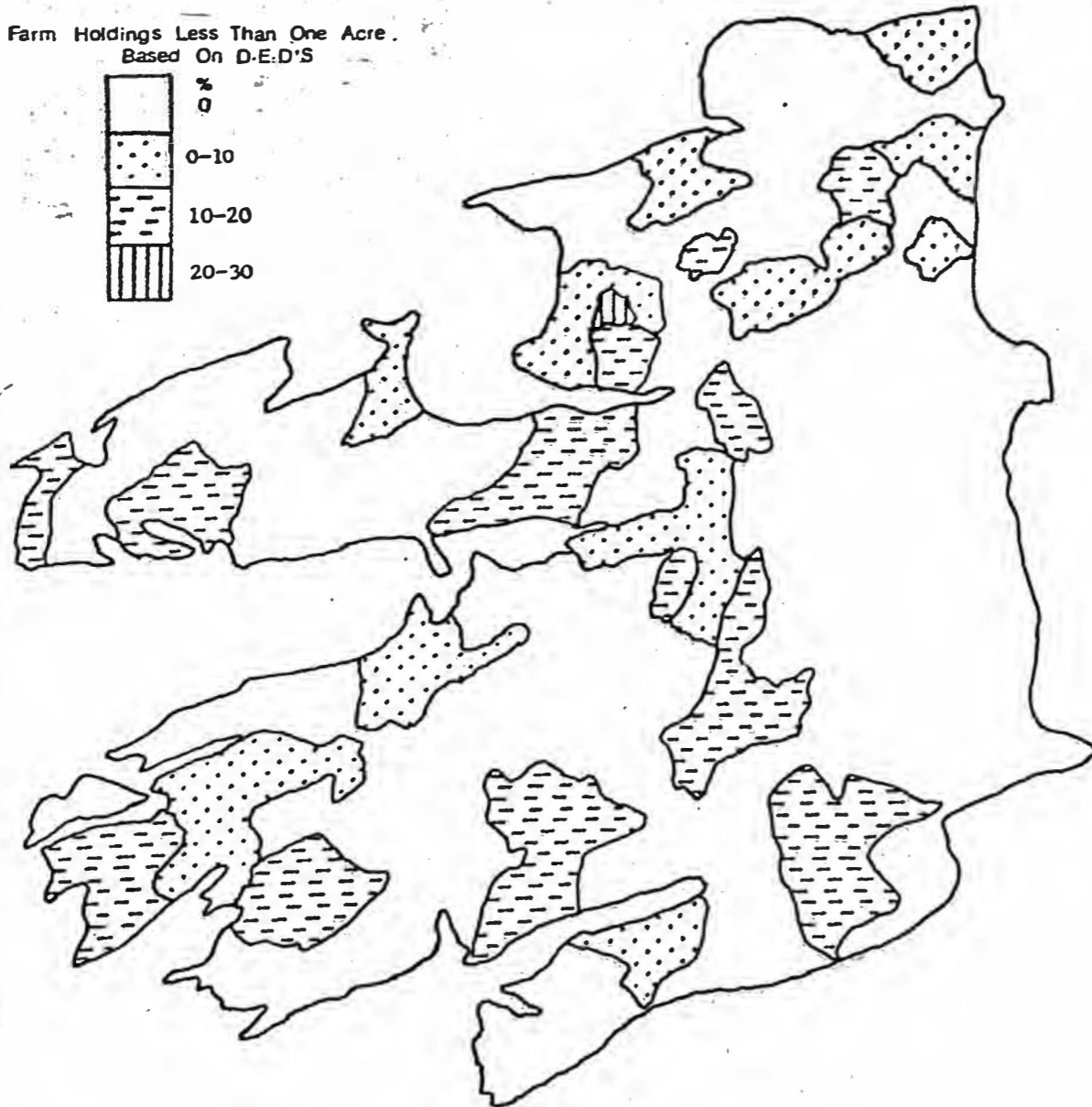
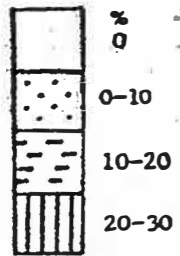
0 200
Yards

Source: Griffith's Valuation

Figure 3

HOLDINGS OF LESS THAN ONE ACRE IN KERRY 1851

Farm Holdings Less Than One Acre.
Based On D.E.D'S

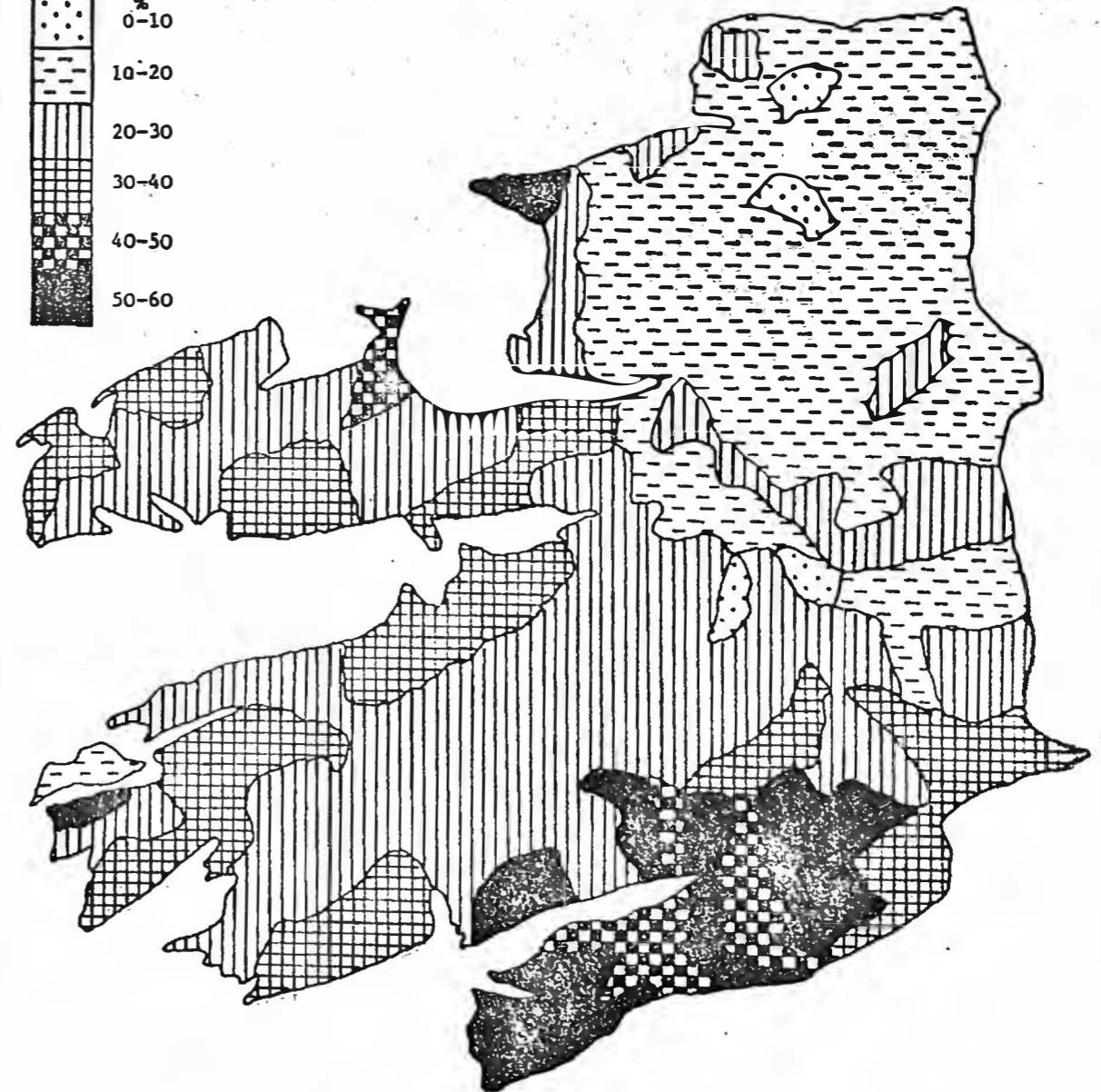
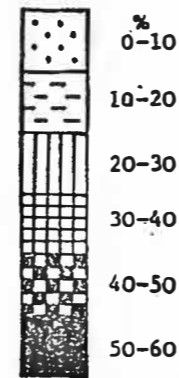


Source: Agricultural Statistics, 1851

Figure 4

POTATO AS A PERCENTAGE OF AGRICULTURAL LAND 1851

Percentage Per Holding, Based On D.E.D'S



Source: Agricultural Statistics, 1851

Figure 5

the Workhouse in Tralee, broke down gates and marched into the yard carrying a black flag, a flag of distress, declaring they would enter the Workhouse by force. The cumulative nature of this single explosive event broadens our minds to a fuller understanding of consequences. It is important to bear in mind, however, that despite the similarity of certain patterns, the experience of every individual was specific, regardless of whether we speak of those people inhabiting the eighty cabins of Brogue-makers Lane (Tralee) or the ninety of Ardfert Village.

Perhaps we have lost many more individual histories through the migration of these people from our shores. Newspapers like the *Tralee Chronicle* referred to the thousands sailing to Boston, New York and Quebec on the "Intrinsic", "The Jane" and "The Lady Russell". Physically, they left us, but the landscape continues to carry many reminders of their presence, in the form of Workhouse ruins, paupers' graves and derelict cabins. The reality of their lives and experience permeates the essence of their existence as preserved through such physical evidence.

POSSIBILITIES

What causes, therefore, can we indicate for the famine in Kerry? Numerous influencing factors have been mentioned. These range from political, social, cultural, to economic processes. For instance, the poor man's crop, the potato, was one factor allowing for the spread and rapid swallowing up of the countryside. The subsequent blight of the potato helped to accelerate the physical hunger. In many respects this is the ultimate in a materialistic explanation. Nevertheless, the potato did play a vital role, not only as food but as a spoke in the whole wheel of culture. There were many other factors, including the cycle of reproduction which deserves consideration in relation to the growth and spread of population. This in itself is a forgotten psychology. But there are many lost causes, and as many reasons to excuse their absence. Yet if we could grasp all the possibilities our cumulative explanation would still threaten to negate itself, leaving us with a shallow understanding. Thus our picture is incomplete. We remain in troubled waters and the true explanation of famine has yet to be penetrated. Why starve? This question brings us back to ourselves. The ship has run its course. But we return only to begin once more and turn back en route disarmed of any new methods and techniques through which protection might be achieved. Alternatively we accept the guidance of a mind bent on free research. A mind which would arouse enthusiasms rather than repeating catechisms. The course must be clear of perpetuating prejudices which have forced us into narrower spheres. For the latter have caused the problems that time rejuvenates, to be continually seen, within the traditional stagnant forms. Too many of us go carelessly about the world furnished with two or three large master keys, trying them on all the doors that we come across — hoping to find one that at least moves the bolt, however weakly. On entering, we hastily seek to shut ourselves into the narrow corridor, only to leave the best and most genuine part of ourselves outside. We are left in a deafening silence clinging to stony broken images. Shall we continue to plant the corpse that sprouts the hollow hopes of the future?

If geography is to acquire a new spirit, then it must reach not outwards but inwards towards an internal discovery. An internal geography demands a meaningful search that inevitably leads to understanding of the self. It helps to broaden the outward perception thus strengthening the foundations of true knowledge. The persistent pangs of hunger continue to breach the swelling mountains of knowledge. Despite attempts at reparation the cracks accumulate and diversify. We must be prepared, therefore, to rebuild, skilled only in the realities of truth.

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