

---

# THE SILENT PEOPLE

---

By The Hon. Albert T. Reynolds, T.D.

The Great Irish Famine silenced one million voices. It robbed a people of their self respect, their independence. It robbed them of family. It left a mark on the Irish countryside and a mark, too, on the minds of the Irish people that is still there today. There are those who would say that it made the Irish people more melancholy and more fatalist in their outlook than before the Famine, when even the poorest people were said to be light of spirit.

It left a people with a guilt about eating that is perhaps unique. I remember an old man who used to eat at the kitchen table with a drawer open in the table in front of him. If someone called to the house while he was eating, he would place the plate of food in the drawer because he was embarrassed to be caught eating. He had heard the stories from people who had survived - the passing on of the horror and the guilt. While he was alive, if there were other people without food, he felt that he shouldn't have any either.

That guilt about food is reflected even in the Arts. In many other cultures some of the great paintings, like those of the Impressionists, are centered around meals. But food and eating - these weren't subjects for Irish artists.

The hunger was in everyone's heart - those were the words of one survivor of the Great Irish Famine. And within living memory, there were people who heard the stories of the horror and the tragedy first hand from those who survived - stories about the bodies of young and old being found along the road, people who had in the final stages tried to eat weeds and grass. There is still an expression in Ireland, *the hungry grass*. It's said that if you walk on the patch of grass where one of these poor people died, you will be overcome by a great feeling of hunger.

The relief systems that were put in place during the Famine were woefully inadequate, and were predicated on reducing peoples' connections with their family structures. If, for the sake of food, a family suffered the horror of the poorhouse or the workhouse, the wife went to one workhouse, the husband to another, and the children to yet another. Often, they never saw one another again. In a country as family-based as Ireland, there could have been no greater distress or no greater pain.

And that pain was multiplied, a thousand thousand times by the tradition of mass emigration created by the Famine - a concept for which there wasn't even a word in the Irish language. The closest language comes, are the words for going away, going across the ocean, or going into exile.

For a great number of Irish, the United States became the only hope of a new and perhaps a better life. The poem by Emma Lazarus, on the base of the Statue of Liberty, described them perfectly:

“Give me your tired, your poor,  
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free  
The wretched refuse of your teeming shores  
Send these, the Homeless, tempest-tossed to me  
I lift my lamp beside the Golden Door.”

President John F. Kennedy, addressing Dail Eireann, in what turned out to be his last major speech in the Old World, recalled a line that conveyed some of the heartbreak:

“They are going, going, going, and we cannot bid them stay.”

One hundred and fifty years have come and gone since that time, and many of those years have been good to the Irish people. The sons and daughters of so many of those Irish people who left made their mark in the New World. There are millions of Americans throughout the United States who are proud to claim Irish ancestry - all valued friends of Ireland.

At home, in Ireland, peace is now within our grasp - closer than it has been for decades. The country is enjoying an economic boom, unmatched by any other European country. The Arts are flourishing - Ireland's Riverdance is on Broadway.

And today the Irish people who come to the New World in America come because they chose to, not because they have no other choice. Today, too, they know they will see their homes again.

The shadow of the Famine will live on in peoples' souls. But then, the Silent People, as Walter Macken called them in his book, still in print today thirty years after it was written - those Silent People shouldn't ever be forgotten.