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**Searching for Ireland in Battery Park City: Brian Tolle's *Irish Hunger Memorial* as a Site  
of Memory and Action**

A Thesis Presented

by

**Alena Pletneva Veller**

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**Alena Pletneva Veller**

We, the thesis committee for the above candidate for the  
Master of Arts degree, hereby recommend  
acceptance of this thesis.

**Michele Bogart – Thesis Advisor  
Professor of Art History, Art Department**

**Joseph Monteyne – Second Reader  
Professor of Art History, Art Department**

This thesis is accepted by the Graduate School

Charles Taber  
Interim Dean of the Graduate School

Abstract of the Thesis

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Created in the context of the worldwide observation of the sesquicentennial of the Great Irish Hunger of 1845-1852, Brian Tolle's *Irish Hunger Memorial* in New York City is a unique monument that seeks to commemorate the catastrophe, inspire future action to eradicate worldwide famine, and to both create a visual marker of American-Irish relations and encourage communication and cultural exchange between the two countries. The work is a large, multi-sensory public sculpture that occupies a historically significant part of the New York City and is easily accessible to a myriad of visitors. However, at its core, this public artwork is an Irish landscape that has been removed from its native surroundings and inserted into the urban environment of Lower Manhattan. The memorial, which eschews concrete representations of the Famine and its immediate effects, strives to go beyond historical explanations, figural

representation or blame in order to address the broader, universal implications of famine. At the same time, its focus is the specific plight of the Irish during the nineteenth century.

This thesis examines the role of the Irish Hunger Memorial as a commemorative object and as a symbol of Irish heritage in America. Through an exploration of the context and commissioning process of the work's creation and a reading of the experience of the work, this study will interrogate the social and political functions served by the memorial and the various ways that it engages with the creation and manipulation of collective memory and national identity. Through its alleged authenticity, the dislocated landscape both mirrors the experience of Famine era Irish immigrants to the United States, infuses physical history into an urban environment that can be seen as lacking in ancestry and heritage, and serves to perpetuate the American melting-pot myth. At the same time it aids in reshaping Irish-American history and reinforces American national identity. In order to reconcile these often contradictory aspects of the Irish Hunger Memorial and illustrate its potential impact on the public sphere this analysis will posit the work as a site of what Michael Rothberg calls "multi-dimensional memory"- a location that encourages the creation of bonds among various groups and allows for the articulation of their histories and experiences.

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## Introduction

In the summer of 2001, an unusual shipment arrived at Battery Park City in New York. The large container held within it numerous pallets of marked stones which assembled into an Irish farmhouse. The small cottage had originally been built in 1838 in County Mayo on the west coast of Ireland and had been alternatively used as both a home and a cattle pen for over a century. For the last forty years it had been uninhabited and largely abandoned by its owners, the Slack family of Atymass. It stood derelict and almost forgotten until one day in 2000, when the Slack family received a call from an American cousin asking them to donate their cottage for the creation of a memorial to the Great Irish Famine in New York City.<sup>1</sup> The family accepted and the cottage was transported and transformed to become the centerpiece of a memorial that seeks to commemorate the hundreds of thousands of Irish men, women and children who lost their lives during the Great Irish Famine of 1845-1852 and the thousands more who were forced in its aftermath to immigrate to the United States.

The memorial, designed by American artist Brian Tolle (1964- ) was intended as a place of commemoration for an event that did not occur in New York City, or in the United States, but that nevertheless had a profound impact on both their histories.<sup>2</sup> Though funded through private channels, the work was meant as a public commemorative piece that would serve both as a

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<sup>1</sup> This cousin was the artist Brian Tolle's partner, Brian Clyne. As Tolle recounted in a phone interview with the author, many prominent New Yorkers offered their own family homes in Ireland for the project. However, after having visited five or six, Tolle had still not found an authentic and uninhabited Famine era cottage. Coincidentally his partner remembered that he too had family in Ireland. Clyne's cousins, the Slack family gave the cottage as a gift to their American relatives who then donated it for the project.

<sup>2</sup> While this thesis will focus on Brian Tolle and his work, it is important to know that he worked closely with landscape artist Gail Wittwer-Laird and the architecture firm *1100 Architect* to create the *Irish Hunger Memorial*.



repository of Irish and American memory of the Famine and as a powerful symbol of the connection between the two countries. Furthermore, the memorial was intended to illustrate the Irish American identity that was produced as a result of that connection and to stand as a symbol of the ongoing world-wide struggle with hunger. In light of these intentions it is important to ask the following questions: did the memorial achieve all of its monumental goals? What kind of memory site is the *Irish Hunger Memorial* and what kind of view of American-Irish relations, as well as American identity, does it provide? It is my assertion that the memorial, though in many ways lacking in specific context and representation of effects of the Famine, sends a message to viewers about the complexity of Irish-American history. To Irish-Americans the site is an important space for the contemplation of painful socially repressed memories; for non-Irish Americans it is a place for confronting and thinking about hunger in both a specific and global context. By being useful in different ways for a multitude of visitors, the memorial functions as a location of multidirectional memory, a site of remembering that leaves space for various groups to interact and learn from each other's suffering.

## Part One: History and Form

### *History of the Memorial*

The *Irish Hunger Memorial* in New York City came into being in the context of worldwide observance of the sesquicentennial of the Great Irish Famine of 1845-52, which began in 1995. In Ireland and among Irish communities abroad commemorations of the event took on the forms of historical conferences, museum exhibits, construction of memorials and awareness-raising events.<sup>3</sup> In New York, which has a significant Irish population, the campaign to commemorate the Irish Famine was led by Republican Governor George Pataki, who came in to office in January of 1996. Pataki, who is of Irish heritage, brought the topic to state-wide attention simultaneously in two ways. First, he added the Famine to the mandatory public school curriculum for the state and second, he spearheaded the construction of a memorial to the Great Hunger in New York City.

The Famine curriculum was folded into the existing human rights course of study for public school students, but was received with mixed emotions in the state for many reasons. Chief among the concerns for detractors was the decision to teach the Famine as form of genocide. New York politicians, with Pataki at their head, caused controversy by publicly placing blame directly on Britain. As the *New York Daily News* reported in 1996, Pataki declared that the new addition to the curriculum would show students that “the great Irish hunger was not

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<sup>3</sup> However, as historian Margaret Kelleher explains this commencement was rather premature, because the Famine did not have real effects until 1846. Furthermore, official commemorations ended for the most part in 1997, about five years prematurely, in order to allow for the commemoration of the 1798 rebellion. This was as historian Margaret Kelleher explains, “An ironic echo of the fatal declaration by another administration, 150 years earlier, that the crisis was past.” “Hunger and History: Monuments to the Great Irish Famine,” *Textual Practice* 16, no.2 (2002): 249.

the result of a massive failure of the Irish potato crop but rather was the result of a deliberate campaign by the British to deny the Irish people the food they needed to survive.”<sup>4</sup> This of course was neither a historically established viewpoint, nor a widely accepted one, and caused contestation from British politicians and the British press as well as from many people in New York. At the same time, the curriculum faced opposition by African American and Jewish groups who were offended at the suggestion that slavery and the Holocaust could be equated with British neglect of Ireland. Statements made by Pataki caused public outcry and a great deal of resentment towards the curriculum. Pataki, however stood his ground, and eventually his approved version of the Great Irish Famine entered all New York City public schools.

In comparison to the controversial curriculum, the road to building the memorial was a far shorter and easier one. Pataki envisaged and made the decision to build a memorial to the Great Hunger in Manhattan, through the Hugh L. Carey Battery Park City Authority (BPCA) with his friend BPCA president and CEO Timothy Carey in 2000, following a trip the two men took to Ireland several years before.<sup>5</sup> The \$5 million memorial was paid for by the BPCA and its design was chosen by a jury that was overseen by Pataki and headed by his mother. The competition was a closed one, consisting of 200 artists mainly invited by art consultant Joyce Pomeroy Schwartz.<sup>6</sup> After several rounds of proposals and interviews the jury eventually chose

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<sup>4</sup> Kimberly Schaye, “Irish Famine in Lesson Plan,” *New York Daily News*, 9 October, 1996, 32.

<sup>5</sup> The authority had been established by the New York State Legislature in 1968 to oversee development of a new neighborhood created by displaced dirt from the recently built World Trade Center. Pataki elected Timothy Carey as the BPCA’s president in May 1999. The two came up with the idea for the New York City *Irish Hunger Memorial* together and both were very involved with the project. As recounted by Brian Tolle (Phone Interview with Brian Tolle, May 6th, 2011) Pataki and Carey had gone to Ireland together in 1996 and upon their return had established a committee to oversee the commission and planning processes.

<sup>6</sup> In a phone conversation with the author on May 6<sup>th</sup>, 2011, Tolle explained how he first came to be involved in the project. He recounted that the memorial competition was a closed one, organized by art consultant Joyce Pomeroy Schwartz. Tolle, who had never designed a memorial before, learned about it through Pomeroy Schwartz’s son, with whom he was serving on jury duty at the time. Schwartz

Brian Tolle to execute the memorial. Purportedly, Tolle's design was chosen because of its strong "emotional impact," as Timothy Carey explained to the *New York Times* in March of 2001.<sup>7</sup> Work on the memorial began shortly after the end of the swift competition, and moved at a rapid pace to meet the ceremonially chosen deadline for its dedication, St. Patrick's Day, 2002. This deadline was not met because construction was delayed in the aftermath of the attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, but the memorial was finally dedicated on July 16<sup>th</sup>, 2002, in the presence of Governor Pataki, Mayor Bloomberg, former Mayor Rudy Giuliani and Irish President Mary McAleese.

In the end, the construction and dedication of the *Irish Hunger Memorial* proved to be quite smooth in comparison to Pataki's earlier project, and there was minimal public objection to the work. Perhaps this was due to the abstracted form of the monument and its reluctance to place blame or give a specific historical account of the Great Irish Famine. Perhaps, in the wake of the national tragedy experienced merely blocks from the site, few New Yorkers wanted to discuss the details of a tragedy which had taken place over one hundred and fifty years prior. In any case, after its completion the form of the work was more spoken about than the details of its content, or the troubled history of what it stands for. The status of the *Irish Hunger Memorial* as a commemorative object, as both a marker of a specific tragic history and the repository of an

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introduced Tolle to his mother, who invited the artist to present his work and qualifications to the executive committee. Ten finalists were chosen to be interviewed out of the original two hundred, and later narrowed down to five. The five who were asked to submit a design were St. Clair Cemics, Richard Fleischer, Agnes Denys and Kiki Smith. Tolle also explained that Governor Pataki was not on the executive committee for the memorial, but he was involved throughout the whole process. Tolle asserts that Pataki was the reason that the monument was built. The idea for it had come to Governor Pataki and Timothy Carey when the two were on a trip in Ireland and they were the ones who selected the committee and supported the project the entire time. Furthermore, Pataki's mother was a member of the committee and also very involved in the project.

<sup>7</sup> David W. Dunlap, "Memorial to the Hunger, Complete With Old Sod," *New York Times*, 15 March, 2001, E1.

inherited national memory, was neither contested nor praised, but merely taken for granted by the public at large.

However, though it may not have caused an immediate response from viewers or critics, the *Irish Hunger Memorial* must not be thought of as entirely neutral. As many art historians and cultural critics have explained, the privileged status and oftentimes unavoidable placement of public art in the contemporary city allows for it to become a vehicle through which contested social, cultural and political issues can intrude into the lives of unsuspecting pedestrians as they go about their daily lives. When linked with the even more contested arena of public memory and history through the form of a memorial, art in the public domain is not just an object that occupies the urban landscape that can be either aesthetically pleasing or edifying to the public or entirely disregarded by the average passerby. Instead a public memorial can in many ways explore, define and even shape national memory and national identity. The creation of a memorial to the Great Irish Famine in Manhattan cannot be thought of as merely the installation of one more sculpture into the vast, but already much populated public spheres of New York City in particular and the United States in general. Instead, it must be looked at as a marker of political and social consciousness of twenty-first century America and a statement about what constitutes national identity in the so-called “melting-pot.” The *Irish Hunger Memorial* may have been conceived, funded and executed by a small and powerful group of New Yorkers, but whom does it ultimately serve? Perhaps the only way to answer this question is to analyze the possible meanings that can be read from the experience of the work.

### *Experience of the Site*

The *Irish Hunger Memorial* is a ninety- six by one-hundred-and-seventy-foot structure on the corner of Vesey Street and North End Avenue in Battery Park City. Surrounded by a luxury

hotel and bank headquarters, the memorial is a large, yet intimate and entirely unusual representation of Ireland in the heart of the financial capital of the United States. It consists of a massive sloping polygonal base made of three-hundred-million-year-old imported Irish limestone, interspersed with strips of glass and a rugged landscape with a partially intact antique cottage on top (fig 1). The work provides little context or explanation of its intent and what it represents. There is no large plaque or sign at the entrance, and the only written information is a small and somewhat vague brochure. Here, the experience of movement through the work is meant to serve as both a history lesson and a motivator for future action.

The memorial has one entrance, through a small dark corridor underneath the structure on the side facing the waterfront (fig. 2). This corridor is narrow and devoid of light, and is filled with a constant stream of projected sound. The moment one enters the structure, the light, movement and noises of the surrounding streets are blocked out, and are entirely replaced by the composed conditions of the space. The entrance functions as a gate and a passageway, which serves to create an important moment of transportation from the quotidian reality of the outdoors to the atypical one of the base of the memorial. The darkness and cold stone of the long yet narrow entry announce the space as solemn and foreboding, something akin to a mausoleum. However, the passageway is not bare, as there is writing inscribed on the dark limestone walls, lit from behind in a way that makes it only visible if one reads while walking (fig 3). The text is revealed as one circumnavigates the space, but it does not form a cohesive message. One finds numerous excerpts, some from the Irish famine years, others statistics of contemporary famines, as well as recipes and quotes that wrap around the memorial inside the corridor and around the outside perimeter. The sound in the base of the structure is made up of various recorded stories,

told by a multitude of voices. This sound contributes a human element to the space, which is at once calming for its familiarity and haunting through its lack of unified message.

Eventually one walks out of the passageway and into the open air top of the structure. The first thing that the visitor encounters is an enclosure made of stone. Walking through it, it becomes evident that this enclosure is actually the remains of a house, a fact visible through its preserved fireplace, walls and other architectural elements (fig. 4). After exiting the house, the visitor begins to climb upwards through the work. Here one is once again privy to the sounds and sights of the surrounding cityscape. However, one is still strangely separated from the familiar conditions outside of the memorial, because one can only walk through a demarcated area. One follows a narrow path which leads through a landscape filled with rush, heather and other Irish flora. The visitor's route is restricted by fences, but one can see that the path runs through a rocky hillside that is dotted on all sides by large stones inscribed with names, and a larger, triangular stone towards the top of the slope marked with an unusual cross. If one continues to follow the trail, one will eventually end up at the top of the structure, where one can partake of two views. The first view facing the Hudson River is of the Battery Park waterfront, New Jersey, the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island (fig 5). The second view is that of the Financial District and the construction at the World Trade Center site.

In comparison to other Famine memorials in both Ireland and abroad, the *Irish Hunger Memorial* in New York City is at first glance an abstract and emotionally lacking representation of the catastrophe. If one considers the *Famine Memorial* in Dublin, Ireland, the *Boston Irish Famine Memorial* and the *Irish Memorial* in Philadelphia it is clear that many artists prefer to depict the effects of the tragedy through representations of emaciated human figures. These give a viewer an immediate visual representation of the effects of the Famine and strive to elicit an

emotional response from any passerby, regardless of his level of knowledge about the event. They inhabit, and in many ways overtake, the environments into which they are placed by forcing the viewer to walk around and come into direct contact with the concrete visual representation of the Famine as a tortured human body. In contrast to the New York Memorial, these works present the Famine as the presence of human suffering, rather than as an absence, or loss and give the viewer no choice as to how to understand them. In Brian Tolle's memorial however, one is given no obvious visual interpretations of the Famine or markers of the people who perished. Instead, the viewer is invited to take a multisensory journey through the work and try to understand in his own manner the variety of information that is presented in the memorial and its accompanying literature.

#### *Puzzling out the Meaning: Symbols of the Famine*

Though hauntingly abstract and vague in its message, the memorial gives viewers a multitude of clues that may help a knowledgeable or inquisitive viewer to decipher its meaning. Chief among these is the size of the structure. The half-acre allotted for the entirety of the work may seem accidental to viewers, but in actuality has its basis in Famine history. The area reflects the shockingly small maximum amount of land that a farmer in Famine-era Ireland could own in order to be eligible for government aid under the Gregory Clause, put into law in 1847. This clause, added to the Irish Poor Law in 1847 by Sir William Gregory, significantly weakened famine-stricken Irish farmers by making them sell their land for extremely low prices in order to qualify for government aid and left a large amount of the population either homeless or owners of no more than a fraction of their former land. The visitor, who may not know this history, still most likely feels constricted by the small dimensions of the landscape and the narrow winding



paths. However, one who is privy to this information gains valuable insight into the design of the memorial and is able to better visualize and understand the plight of Famine-era farmers.

A second clue that visitors can easily overlook is the fact that Atymass, the small village from which the cottage was transported, had the first recorded hunger death, and that the house itself had been inhabited by a family during the Famine. For Brian Tolle, this fact was significant because it symbolically placed this cottage at the “Ground Zero of the Famine.”<sup>8</sup> For the casual observer, nothing about the cottage or its placement immediately reveals its authenticity and history. Instead, what one sees is merely a building in ruins, one that may or may not have a deep connection to the Famine or its history. Again, one must have some previous knowledge, or at least have very carefully read the memorial pamphlet to appreciate the cottage as an artifact and witness of the Famine. However, even without this, one cannot help but be haunted by its ruined state that leaves the whole living area of the house completely open to the elements and without any protection.

Another major clue and Irish symbol is the triangular stone marked with a cross that stands at the apex of the work. This is a pilgrim's standing stone, a type of commemorative marker that is popular in Ireland and that is often associated with sacred sites (fig 6). The pilgrim's stone is found in many parts of Ireland, but its roots are unknown. The cross on the stone, called the Cross of Arcs, may have Celtic or Christian roots and is thus venerated by both groups.<sup>9</sup> Other hints can be found in the materials, like the fossilized limestone, various grasses,

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<sup>8</sup> Speaking with the author Tolle referred to this cottage as “almost the Ground Zero of the Famine.” Although he had not known its long history at the beginning of the project, Tolle feels that this makes it even “more powerful” than he had first imagined. (Phone Interview with Brian Tolle, May 6<sup>th</sup>, 2011)

<sup>9</sup> The standing stone was actually not a part of Tolle's original design for the memorial. It was added during the last stage of construction due to pressure by Timothy Carey, who had received a 25 foot cross from a prominent member of the New York City Irish community. Tolle was opposed to the donated

and flowers in the landscape used for the memorial (fig 7). According to the brochure available at the memorial and on the website of the park, the materials used in the *Irish Hunger Memorial* are for the most part imported from Ireland and all have connections to the Famine. The grasses and flowers correspond to those found in Irish counties affected by the Famine. While the brochure for the memorial identifies what types of flora are found in the landscape, it does not specifically explain where these plants can be found and how they relate to the catastrophe.<sup>10</sup> At the same time, for those visitors familiar with the Irish countryside, the flora and rocks provide a feeling of authenticity and establish the cottage and landscape as real Irish specimens.

Nevertheless, for the average visitor who may not be knowledgeable on the subject, Famine symbols may not be enough to comprehend the memorial. Instead, a visitor can search for meaning through viewing the structure vis-à-vis its environment.<sup>11</sup> One factor that is hard to miss is that the cottage and landscape do not belong in New York City. Though reaching twenty-five feet in height, the work is dwarfed significantly by the high-rise buildings around it and

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cross because he did not want the memorial to have overt religious references, but was willing to compromise. Working with historian Maureen Murphy, Tolle came upon the idea of the pilgrim's stone.

<sup>10</sup> Hugh L. Carey Battery Park City Authority. *Irish Hunger Memorial* (New York: Battery Park City Authority, 2002), Brochure.

<sup>11</sup> In this, and many other respects the *Irish Hunger Memorial* draws comparisons to Maya Lin's Vietnam War Veteran's Memorial in Washington D.C. Both structures use explanatory text minimally and require quite a bit of effort on the part of the viewer. However, it is my view that the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, due to its placement in close proximity with other memorials is more easily to readable viewers. Furthermore, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial does not have a stated intent of preventing future wars. Rather, it was built as a place for veterans, a group directly associated with the conflict, to have a place to reflect and mourn. As is clear by its success amongst veterans the memorial fulfills its goals for its intended audience as well as for many Americans who may or may not have connections to the war.

The Vietnam Veteran's Memorial undoubtedly influenced Tolle in many ways. However, he points out that he was looking for a different type of experience and deliberately did not engrave the text on to the base of *Irish Hunger Memorial*, because he did not want it to be tactile, like Maya Lin's work. Tolle points out that his piece is sculpture, not architecture and is not meant to be timeless. The text and audio recording are changeable, as is the landscape. Whereas Lin wanted to cut into the earth in a violent and symbolic way, Tolle wanted his work to stand out from its surroundings and to appear suspended.

seems squeezed into its environment. Likewise, the unruly appearance of the landscape stands in contrast with the gridded streets, stark architecture and constructed natural elements of Lower Manhattan and Battery Park City (fig 6). The work is dually enclosed, first, by the massive base on which it stands, and second, by the urban environment that surrounds it. Viewed from above, it can evoke visions of an alien creation dropped on to an unsuspecting locale.

The memorial itself is also made up of various contained spaces (the corridor underneath the structure, the cottage, and the fenced in landscape) that restrict the movements of visitors and make interactions with each other unavoidable. Although the sloping hillside is quite large (fig 8), the area available for walking takes up a small fraction of its surface, and fences with “no touching” signs restrict any diversion from the established route. Visitors must be aware of each others' movements through the landscape in order to exit and enter the small cottage and pass each other on the narrow trail. Groups of visitors also often stand side by side, partaking of the views, and it is possible to overhear a multitude of conversations and reactions in every part of the memorial. Rather than interacting with the memorial on their own terms, visitors are often forced to make room for one another and watch each other's experiences unfold. Furthermore, the memorial does not provide spaces for leisurely viewing or solitary contemplation. The only benches provided for visitors to sit and look at the structure are outside of it, and have very limited views of the work. Combined, the contained spaces of the work serve to provide an interesting sense of community, which can be unusual in a bustling urban environment, as visitors are forced to interact with each other by the limited area occupied by the work. Simultaneously however, visitors are able to better comprehend the Famine era land limitations that influenced the size of the work and experience (albeit only minimally) the feelings of restraint, control and discomfort felt by Famine era Irish.

## Part Two: Memory and Identity

### *The Memorial as a Symbol of Irish-American Experience*

The visual inconsistency between the *Irish Hunger Memorial* and its environment can be partially understood in a symbolic sense. The stark visual contrast between the memorial and its setting is largely due to the fact that the cottage, which is the centerpiece of the memorial, suffered a sort of historical rupture. The farmhouse as well as the inscribed rocks were literally ripped out of one environment and transported into another. The cottage was disassembled in Ireland, shipped to New York and then painstakingly recreated and fortified so that its ruined state would remain intact. However, the movement of the farmhouse did not preserve its history or its meaning. As a consequence of the move from Ireland to New York, the cottage lost its familial past as well as its habitual surroundings. Thus, transported out of County Mayo into Battery Park City, the cottage became metonymic for Ireland itself rather than a mere example of a historical site.

In fact, in the loss of context that occurred as a consequence of relocating the cottage, the architectural specimen mirrors the rupture in memory, identity and environment felt by the nineteenth century immigrants to New York. When in the fall of 1845 the *Phytophthora infestans* fungus infected the potato harvest of Ireland, it caught the nation completely unaware and unprepared for its consequences. Over the next seven years the botanical epidemic would go on to ravage the crops of the nation, which was almost entirely dependent on the potato for

subsistence.<sup>12</sup> For another country, the fungus may not have been devastating or disastrous,<sup>13</sup> but for Ireland, which was crippled by widespread poverty and overpopulation in addition to political and social tensions caused by colonization, the epidemic had widespread effects and long-lasting consequences. From 1845-1852 Ireland lost one and a half million people from its population from the combination of famine-related death and immigration to countries such as Britain, Canada and the United States.<sup>14</sup>

However, for most Irish in America, immigration did not bring immediate salvation. Instead it brought isolation and more suffering. As historian Kevin O'Neill explains, famine in Ireland was followed by a long and arduous journey which many did not survive. For those who did, the new landscape was a racist and menacing one filled with "No Irish need apply" signs, pogrom-type riots in Philadelphia and New York, convent burning in Charleston and, most frightening of all, the emergence of the Know Nothing party in the 1850's."<sup>15</sup> Unlike what is commonly believed in the United States today, America did not welcome the incoming famine-stricken Irish with open arms. Instead, the trauma of the Famine catastrophe was deepened through a second trauma, one of discrimination and the denial of equal rights to immigrants.

Furthermore, both traumas were deepened by the fact that the Famine, its causes and effects were largely unmentioned in mainstream historical accounts, a fact that left many survivors and their families with a sense of bitterness and shame. In fact, the Famine was largely

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<sup>12</sup> The potato was an important part of the diet for 66% of the population and the sole diet for 1/3 of the population Ruth-Ann Harris, Introduction to, *The Great Famine and the Irish Diaspora in America*, ed. Arthur Gribben (Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 1999), 2.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 3. In fact it was not for the United States, Britain or Western Europe who were all equally touched by the virus.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>15</sup> Kevin O'Neill, "The Star-Spangled Shamrock: Memory and Meaning in Irish America," in *History and Memory in Modern Ireland*, ed. Ian McBride (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 123.

ignored in academic spheres until fifty years ago.<sup>16</sup> Since then, there has been a great deal of discussion on the subject, as well as a major split in opinion. For many people, especially some Irish politicians and nationalists, England is the sole source of blame for Famine deaths. All of the English are seen as culpable for their pre-Famine land-laws in Ireland, as well as their lack of response during Famine years as a deliberate attempt at ethnic cleansing.<sup>17</sup> For others, the roots of the Famine lie deep in Irish history, and England's failure to aid its colony is a reflection of *laissez-faire* economics and neglectful actions, but not necessarily deliberate ones. While most historians stay somewhere in between and attempt to sift through the documents and oral histories to separate fact from myth, for the majority of Irish people the roots and causes of the Famine are still as much contested territory as they were nearly one hundred and fifty years ago.

The Great Irish Famine had no simple historical resolution, but in addition to lacking an official history of the Famine, survivors and their descendants lacked spaces which preserved its memory, thus allowing for the latter's disintegration over the years. Most visual reminders of the Famine disappeared in Ireland in the years immediately following the catastrophe. As historian Christine Kenealy explains, "Famine graveyards, workhouses and soup kitchens became representations of the failure of Irish society and were abandoned and left to disintegrate from the landscape and dissipate from memory."<sup>18</sup> This was partially due to the crippled economy and civic infrastructure in post-Famine years, but also partially because of a collective shame that

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<sup>16</sup> Irish historians were significantly silent on the topic, from 1900 to the 1980 there were only two major academic publications on the Famine.

<sup>17</sup> One of the best known condemnations of the British is Irish nationalist John Mitchell's 1860 book, *The Last Conquest of Ireland (Perhaps)*. An example of a revisionist account is *The Great Irish Famine: Studies in Irish History, 1845-52* edited by R. Dudley Andrews and T. Desmond Williams from 1956.

<sup>18</sup> Christine Kenealy, "The Great Irish Famine-A Dangerous Memory?" in *The Great Famine and the Irish Diaspora in America*, ed. Arthur Gribben (Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 1999), 246.

enveloped the country. The real Famine history was complex and unpleasant, and the blame for what occurred could not be easily placed.<sup>19</sup> Weakened by the number of Famine deaths and the significant loss of the population through immigration, the country went through a slow recovery that focused on looking forward, rather than remembering the Famine. In the years following the catastrophe, parts of the countryside were left almost entirely abandoned and to a certain extent the Irish people neglected the landscape associated with the Famine. Derelict homes like the Slack Cottage littered the landscape and as they fell further and further into disrepair not only they, but the history they preserved eroded from the historical memory.

Yet, though an official Famine history was not established in Ireland and Famine landmarks were not preserved, survivors who stayed in Ireland arguably had an easier path to dealing with the cultural trauma of the Famine. In fact, some scholars suggest that for Irish immigrants in the United States the trauma experienced in the Famine years was additionally deepened by a loss of context in leaving Ireland. As Stephanie Rains explains,

The disjuncture, and indeed trauma, experienced by the generation who left Ireland was most strikingly manifested in the removal of context for the knowledge and memories which they had of their group identities. Those who remain in the landscape and community which provides context to those memories have less “hunger” for the inevitably missing details of their narratives....For those whose personal history contains the rupture of emigration however, the lack of context for the memories which do remain seems to provoke a need to fill in the gaps and elisions between those memories.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Kenealy points out that “the ships that left Ireland laden with food during the Famine were doing so largely for the financial benefit of Irish merchants and traders. The large farmers who benefited from the availability and sale of cheap land toward the latter end of the Famine were also Irish, and, sometimes, Catholic... Corruption, stealing, hoarding and even cannibalism are part of the darker reality of the Famine years, and should not be forgotten in an attempt to make the Famine a simplistic morality tale about the 'goodies' (the Irish people en masse) and the 'baddies' (the whole of the British people).” *Ibid.*, 248.

<sup>20</sup> Stephanie Rains, “Irish Roots: Genealogy and the Performance of Irishness,” in *The Irish in Us: Irishness, Performativity, and Popular Culture*, ed. Diane Negra (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 152.

Even a new life and a new environment do not help satiate the hunger for memories. As David Lowenthal explains in his work on landscape and memory, assimilation in a new environment can actually lead to repressed discontent and unexplored nostalgia in those for whom immigration was not a choice, but a necessity. He asserts that

Those deprived of their own past landscapes may suffer self-imposed amnesia. Sheer survival may require prisoners and forced migrants to relinquish memories of a past that would contrast too poignantly with the present, but rejection often destroys their sense of purpose and personal worth; without the past they cannot provision a future worth having.<sup>21</sup>

In effect, the loss of Famine markers and the non-existence of signs of the catastrophe in their new surroundings did not help Irish immigrants to forget the Famine, but rather doubled their loss. By transposing a fragment of an Irish landscape into an American city, the *Irish Hunger Memorial* shows the fissure in memory experienced by 19<sup>th</sup> century Irish immigrants to New York; not only re-infuses the history of the native land of Irish immigrants into their adopted one, but also charges them with the task of continuing to remember and commemorate both the landscapes and the events which their ancestors almost let disappear.

#### *Identity in the Context of the Memorial*

It is possible to see that the *Irish Hunger Memorial* plays an essential role in addressing and reinterpreting the experience of Irish immigrants in the United States and serves as an important visual reminder of the link between their Irish ancestry and roots and their adopted American identity. Through its very existence, the *Irish Hunger Memorial* shows an acceptance

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<sup>21</sup> David Lowenthal, "Past Time, Present Place: Landscape and Memory," *Geographical Review* 65, no. 1 (Jan., 1975): 15.



of the Irish as an important part of the history of New York and the United States and solidifies the bond between the two countries (a fact made very visible by the attendance of the Irish president at its dedication.) In effect, through the memorial, the Irish community is symbolically suffused into the American landscape and its history and trauma become part of the topography of the country.

Furthermore, even if the memorial is meant to be a marker of the past, it has acquired a life and a role for the Irish American community of the present. One cannot ignore that for its instigator, George Pataki, the memorial was as much a political vehicle as a cultural one because it allowed him to speak directly to the Irish American community of New York and declare himself as one of their own. In fact, through Pataki, the memorial has in some ways become the symbol of Irish American Republicans, a group of which held their “Official 2004 Celebration of Irish Heritage” for the 2004 Republican National Convention (attended by Governor Pataki and George W. Bush) at the site. It is possible to see that through such events the memorial stops being a merely a place of mourning or commemoration and becomes a symbolic home of Irish-American identity.

However, it is important to look at the *Irish Hunger Memorial* not only as a place for the preservation of Irish memory and identity, but also as one which helps to reinforce a more general American one. Though this work was created to represent the bonds between Ireland and the United States, it actually can serve to create new and sometimes artificial shared memories between the two countries, and can serve the American people in ways which have nothing to do with the Famine. One way in which the memorial serves the American people at large, and not only Irish Americans, is through the infusion of physical history into an urban environment that lacks signs of ancestry and heritage. As Lowenthal suggests, visual historical markers are so

necessary to western civilization that many societies which lack an ancient history of their own will sometimes try to acquire it through other means, like the creation of copies of ancient buildings. Perhaps one can look at the memorial as a representation of an American “need for a more ancient history.”<sup>22</sup> Lowenthal asserts that societies will look for traces of the past in order to attain a “feeling of accretion.” He explains that “even a past fragmented by ruin suggests long-continued occupancy...The accretions of occupancy are missed by those who live in landscapes that lack them.”<sup>23</sup> It is possible that part of what inspired the memorial, and what makes it poignant and compelling to visitors is the fact that it gives an urban environment a feeling of heritage, which serves to satisfy an American desire for tangible historical sites. By being largely abstract and non-specific about the causes and effects of the Famine, the work serves to add age to the landscape, without overpowering it with meaning or emotion. Only those who go to the memorial with prior knowledge or a connection to the catastrophe would be able to see and comprehend the various symbols that Tolle scattered throughout his design. For many others, the memorial is more of a place to think about Irishness or even immigration, but not a truly specific representation of the calamity of 1845-52.

With its ambiguous symbolism and lack of didacticism, the memorial is able to write a heroic American national narrative in addition to a traumatic Irish one, and serves to proclaim the United States as a tolerant and accepting nation. This can in many ways still be problematic. As many scholars have noted, American national identity is largely based on the myth of the melting-pot, the idea that the country accepts people of all nations and ethnicities and mixes them together creating a multi-vocal and collaborative community which brings out the best in

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 10.

each culture. However, the identities chosen to participate in this melting-pot are often deliberately white, so as to not be threatening to the hegemonic European heritage. As Diane Negra explains in *The Irish in Us: Irishness, Performativity and Popular Culture*, in the United States, “processes of transcultural mixing and matching seem to be catalyzing desire for monoethnic stability.”<sup>24</sup> In fact, Irishness “seems increasingly to serve as the ideal guilt-free white ethnicity of choice...when Americans are asked to report their ethnic backgrounds, Irishness (once a socially stigmatized ethnic category) is now over-reported.”<sup>25</sup> Possibly, this is due to the fact that in popular culture Ireland is presented as “a moral antidote to contemporary ills... a culture unsullied by consumerism and modernity.”<sup>26</sup> The *Irish Hunger Memorial* can thus be seen as a tangible representation of an American myth. One could easily come to the memorial and, ignoring its message of loss and ongoing world hunger, focus only on the beauty of the rustic cottage and its landscape. Standing at the apex of the work, one can imagine oneself to belong to the culture it represents, without ever truly knowing anything about it. For the many Americans who now identify with Irish heritage the fragment of landscape and antique farmhouse can thus serve to fuse the constructed and real aspects of their history and identity.

The memorial celebrates the myth of the melting pot through its commemoration of the Famine, the single most important cause for Irish immigration to the United States, at a time of increased debates over immigration and the status of illegal immigrants in America. Through the work, America is shown to be a land of salvation, a surrogate home to those fleeing upheaval in their own country, but the incident that it brings into public consciousness is over 150 years old

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<sup>24</sup> Diane Negra, Introduction, *The Irish in Us: Irishness, Performativity, and Popular Culture*, ed. Diane Negra (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 3.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

and no survivors remain to challenge official histories of what occurred. What is not discussed or revealed is that immigration is an ongoing phenomenon and one which is equally dangerous, difficult and traumatic today. What is equally ignored, both through this work and through the melting-pot notion, is that America is not, and never was a place of salvation/desire for all immigrants- that some groups were brought here forcefully, others eradicated or displaced to make room for settlers and many others restricted, denied or sent back from America's shores. By being memorialized as an incident in the past and as a relic, the Irish Famine and Irish immigration create a comfortable image of what America was built on and the memorial creates the illusion that both famine and immigration are terms from the past. This neutralizes both America's past and present and perpetuates the melting pot myth.

#### *Multi-Directional Memory in Lower Manhattan*

Although Irishness and Irish identity are actively used to perpetuate the melting-pot myth and create a comfortable national heritage, the recognition of Irish suffering does not have to mean that other groups' painful histories will be necessarily diminished. As Michael Rothberg explains in, *Multi-directional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*, the public sphere is not "a scarce resource" and "the interaction of different collective memories within that sphere" does not have to take the form of "a zero-sum struggle for preeminence."<sup>27</sup> He explains that often, a renewed focus on the tragic history of one group can cause others to step forward and demand recognition and a focus of attention on themselves, rather than others. Using the example of the response of some Black activists to the installation

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<sup>27</sup> Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 4. As previously mentioned, such a struggle was instantly visible when the government of New York decided to add the Great Irish Famine to the public school curriculum where it would be taught as alongside slavery and the Jewish Holocaust.

of a Holocaust Museum in Washington D.C. Rothberg explains that marginalized groups feel threatened and doubly ignored when they see the sufferings of others come to the fore in a nationwide commemoration, a fact which has led many theorists to argue that collective memory is essentially competitive.

However, according to Rothberg, such feelings are only the initial reactions and are inconsistent with the actual impact of memorial geared towards specific groups. For him, any memorial or space for public commemoration has the possibility of becoming a site of multidirectional, rather than competitive memory; a public place in which new bonds are created among communities and a wider understanding of the traumas and triumphs of different groups can create solidarity among them. Rothberg asserts that the public sphere is “a malleable discursive space in which groups do not simply articulate established positions but actually come into being through their dialogical interactions with others; both the subjects and spaces of the public are open to continual reconstruction.”<sup>28</sup> He explains that the articulation of one group's history of injustice can actually make it easier for others to articulate their experiences and to gain a place in the larger national and international dialogues. Rothberg asserts that Holocaust memory has enabled the articulation of other groups' memories and has aided in processes of dealing with decolonization and other, less widely known genocides. In effect, through the process of commemoration in the public sphere, the history of one group can help to create a language for others to speak out about their own suffering. Such commemorations can create greater communication between seemingly disparate groups.

Seen through this lens, Irish memory does not need to interfere with other groups' memories in the landscape of New York City nor become just an easy memory to aid in

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 5.

establishing a comfortable national identity. In fact, commemoration of the Famine can serve as a method to opening a discussion about the nature of genocide and famine around the world. Although the *Irish Hunger Memorial* may be intentionally vague or lacking in context and may require active participation and prior knowledge of the viewer, it nevertheless creates a space where a catastrophic event can reemerge out of forgetting and into public consciousness. At the same time, for each individual who encounters it, the memorial is first and foremost a personal journey that cannot be duplicated by another visitor, foretold by the artist of the work or shaped by the various groups who have interest in it. As Tolle explains, he never set out to make a work that would dictate an experience, history or even an emotion to his viewers, as most Famine memorials do. He deliberately stayed away from graphic representations or political statements in order to encourage the viewer to figure out the meaning on his own and have a personal experience. Tolle says that the best praise that he has gotten for the memorial is that it “trusts the intelligence of the viewer.” Some may of course come away from it without much of a change in ideas or sympathy, but for others it will be moving and educational. For Tolle, it is a “combination of what’s written and what’s felt” that will hopefully stay with the viewer long after he leaves it and will require further engagement even after the fact.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> (Phone Interview with Brian Tolle, May 6<sup>th</sup>, 2011)

## **Conclusion: The Memorial and Hunger Awareness**

Encountering the *Irish Hunger Memorial* is not a monolithic experience. One can enjoy the work purely for its aesthetic qualities, or take a moment to ponder it in relation to its site. Standing in the midst of the landscape, the visitor may realize that although she may be in Manhattan, she is in an abandoned locale. Perhaps, he will then take a moment to read some of the quotations on the base of the memorial and realize that they do not just speak of a calamity that occurred in Ireland, 150 years ago, but come from sources all over the world, from the historical to the contemporary. This engagement with the piece might then encourage the viewer to find out more on his own as well as to be more considerate of the experiences of others.

In fact, since its inauguration, the memorial has already prompted a lot of discussion about the efforts being undertaken to eradicate world hunger, and has incited journalists and historians to push for greater participation in battling hunger in New York state.<sup>30</sup> Though it does not attempt to speak for others or even create what could be mistaken for a complete representation of the catastrophe in Ireland, the work situates the Irish Famine alongside other similar events which, although less known and perhaps with less impact on New York City or the United States, were similarly traumatic to those who experienced them. By not being overtly

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<sup>30</sup> See for example Albor Ruiz's article "Today's Hunger Dims Famine Tribute" *New York Daily News*, 22 July, 2002, 3. Furthermore, the Mercy Corps "Action Center to End World Hunger" was opened across the street from the memorial in October of 2008. The center provides information about hunger worldwide and gives specific suggestions for things that visitors can do to help those in need.

didactic about the Irish Famine, the work implies that the suffering of the Irish people must not become a collective memory which surpasses and erases all other memories of famine. The work of art instead urges for the lessons of the past to be applied to present day events.



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Figure 1. Brian Tolle, Irish Hunger Memorial, 2002, Battery Park City, New York, NY. Photo by Author.



Figure 2. View Inside Passageway, Brian Tolle, Irish Hunger Memorial, 2002, Battery Park City, New York, NY. Photo by Author.

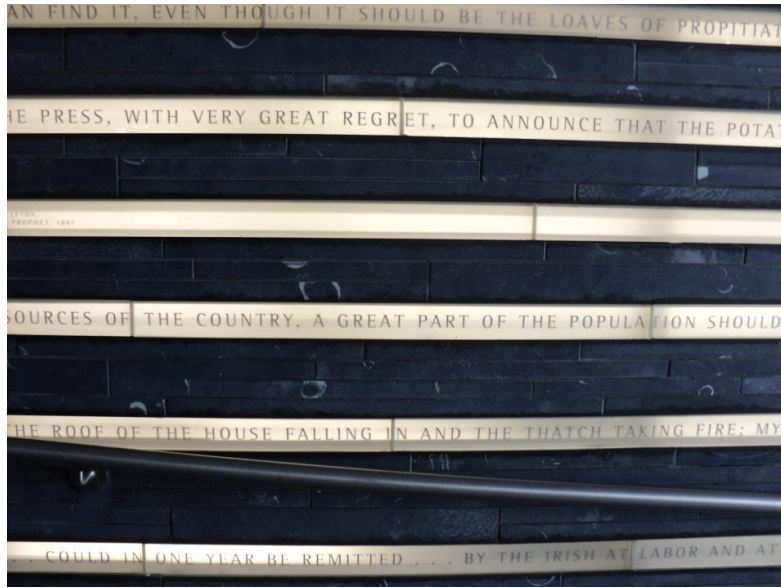


Figure 3. Detail of Text, Brian Tolle, Irish Hunger Memorial, 2002, Battery Park City, New York, NY. Photo by Author.

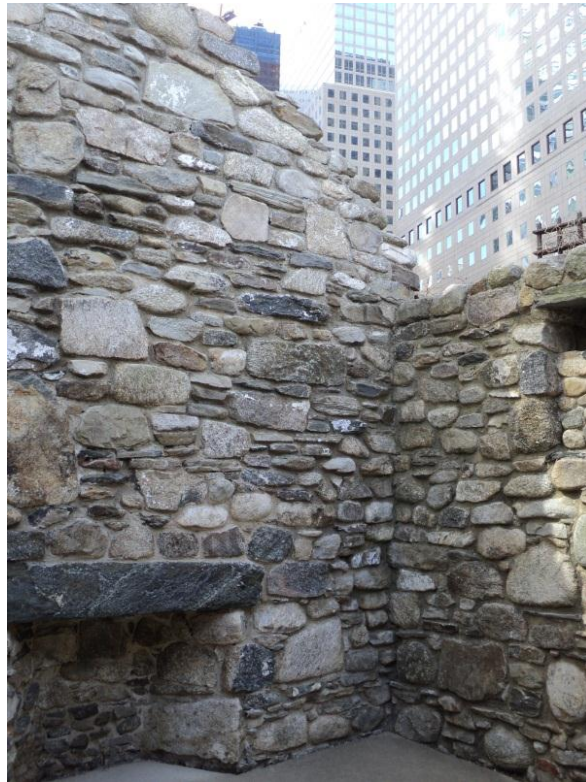


Figure 4. View Inside Cottage, Brian Tolle, Irish Hunger Memorial, 2002, Battery Park City, New York, NY. Photo by Author.





Figure 5. View Facing the Waterfront, Brian Tolle, Irish Hunger Memorial, 2002, Battery Park City, New York, NY. Photo by Author.



Figure 6. Pilgrim's Standing Stone, Brian Tolle, Irish Hunger Memorial, 2002, Battery Park City, New York, NY. Photo by Author.



Figure 7. Detail of Stones, Brian Tolle, Irish Hunger Memorial, 2002, Battery Park City, New York, NY. Photo by Author.



Figure 8. Side View, Brian Tolle, Irish Hunger Memorial, 2002, Battery Park City, New York, NY. Photo by Author.