

Asenath Nicholson, *Annals of the Famine in Ireland* (1851). Edited and introduced by Maureen Murphy. Dublin: Lilliput Press, 1998. 240 pages. IR£9.99.

The recent commemoration of the Great Irish Famine of 1845-1851 has yielded an array of publications: regional analyses, new and republished famine histories, studies of famine folklore and famine literature, etc. Already, one senses a certain 'famine fatigue' ensuing from this proliferation of volumes and, consequently, a regrettable and premature narrowing of the fields of study, a trend certainly reinforced by the ill-advised ending of official commemoration in the summer of 1997. The republication by Lilliput Press of Asenath Nicholson's eye-witness account of famine conditions in 1847 and 1848, ably edited and introduced by Maureen Murphy, is thus a welcome indication of one publisher's continuing commitment to famine historiography and restores, in a handsome and reasonably priced volume, one of the most distinctive and sharply observed testimonies of the period.

In 1844, the Vermont-born Asenath Hatch Nicholson first arrived in Ireland, her motive being to "personally investigate the condition of the Irish poor", some of whom she had already encountered in the course of philanthropic work "in the garrets and cellars of New York". Her travels in the west and south of the country, visiting and staying in homes of the rural poor, spanned over a year and were the subject of her 1847 publication, *Ireland's Welcome to the Stranger*. In the summer of 1846, she returned to Ireland and, following a stay in Dublin, resumed her travels in the north, west and south of the country during which she distributed funds made available to her by friends in America. This latter journey, ending in September 1848, is the subject of *Annals of the Famine in Ireland*, first published in London in 1850 as part of a longer study of Irish history, and published separately as an account of "the material facts of Famine and its effects" in New York in 1851.

Nicholson's writings remained largely unacknowledged for many years, although significant exceptions to this critical neglect include Frank O'Connor's reference to her "remarkable" work in his 1967 survey *The Backward Look* and, in recent years, Seamus Deane's judicious but inevitably brief selection of extracts in Volume II of *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*. The absence of substantial biographical information, to date, has also served to reinforce the 'eccentric' image of person and text. In this regard, Maureen Murphy's edition performs a double service: the biographical information made available in her introduction situates Nicholson in a New York circle of reformers, abolitionists and temperance advocates; while the notes which accompany the text, drawing from an impressive range of contemporary sources, illuminate the Irish context of Nicholson's account and

demonstrate the 'stranger's' acute recognition of many of the economic and social problems of the time.

From the early episodes of Nicholson's narrative emerges a relatively rare description of the hunger and starvation prevalent in Dublin in the early months of 1847, based on the American woman's visits to homes in the Liberties area. When she moved to rural districts, she employed a network of contacts (many of them helpfully identified by Murphy) such as the local rector or curate who introduced her to the "condition of the poor". The largely sequential narrative, following Nicholson's movements from place to place, powerfully conveys the increasing horror and overwhelming nature of the sights which she witnessed. Many of the particular details of her account are unforgettable: figures like "petrified statues" standing outside doors and windows; tumbled cabins, many of which were "pulled down" on their dead inhabitants as a grave; a young boy burying "uncoffined" the dead bodies of his two brothers; and the "sleek dogs of Arranmore".

Yet the strength of Nicholson's testimony lies most of all in her combination of particular detail and general analysis. From the opening pages, she sardonically explodes 'pieties' such as the view, still with us, of the pre-famine peasantry as unproblematically "a happy and contented people". Her diagnosis of the state of Ireland reflects a number of her own preoccupations: female philanthropy receives extensive praise while the continuing distillation of grain is a particular target of attack, and her unambiguous praise for Donegal landlord Lord George Hill's elimination of the Rundale system is certainly open to question. Other aspects of her analysis, however, have a much wider relevance and anticipate many of the vexed, and continuing, debates in famine studies; for example, her castigation of the potato's role in sustaining the oppression and degradation of the poor, and her exposure of ineptitude and corruption in the official distribution of relief. According to Nicholson, even if famine's "breaking forth could not have been foreseen or prevented, [it] need never have resulted in the loss of a single life". And while the clarity of such an argument sits uneasily with some famine historiography, its conclusion is not easily dismissed: "The principle of throwing away life to-day, lest means to protect it tomorrow might be lessened, was fully and practically carried on and carried out."

The 'uniqueness' of Asenath Nicholson's account, however, despite the author's own claims, deserves careful and cautious consideration. More generally, the nature and function of these famine testimonies, their motifs and conventions, and the importance of audience, remain, surprisingly, little discussed. While Murphy briefly contrasts Nicholson's narrative with those of her Quaker counterparts, a much fuller comparative study is necessary before this or other narratives' singularity may be determined. One hopes that this invaluable edition, and the

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continuing relevance of famine sources which it demonstrates, will stimulate such enquiries.

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