

Tragedy in Ireland

THE GREAT FAMINE, edited by R. Dudley Edwards and T. Desmond Williams. New York University Press, 1957. 436 pages. \$6.

Reviewed by **MARSHALL CRANE**

IF the New Yorker of today is lonesome it is probably his own fault. Eight million fellow citizens should be plenty of company. Any exact statement of where they or their forebears have come from is difficult, if not impossible, but visitors to the city on the seventeenth of March have often wondered if a good many of the eight million are not natives of a green little isle across the sea. This strange little land, though it is only two thirds as large as New York State, and has less than half as many inhabitants as New York City, has nevertheless nourished family trees in every part of the world, not a few of them those of national heroes.

Of course, New Yorkers, and Americans in general, are of all racial and national origins. But even so, the wise-cracks one hears on Saint Patrick's Day may not be quite as absurd as they seem. For Irishmen and their offspring have been seasoning our ethnic dish for three hundred years or more, and a really surprising number have arrived in the United States during the past century.

In 1845 an air-borne spore blew over Erin, carrying with it a blight which attacked the potato plant, upon which the population were largely dependent for their existence. They were ill-equipped at best, in experience and tools, to combat it, and famine, disease and desolation followed in its wake for seven long years. When it finally departed

it left a poorer and a sadder land. Between two and three million Irishmen had died of hunger and disease, or had left the land of their birth to settle elsewhere. Families, clans, chapters of religious orders, indeed whole communities had ceased to exist. Varieties of cultivated plants and breeds of livestock had been exterminated. In some sections the wild fish and game had disappeared, as well as many of the edible wild plants.

Of any ten Americans with Irish names, nine or more are descended from ancestors who fled from what, at that time, seemed to be certain death.

Although this was probably the worst famine on record, it was certainly not the only one. In fact it was the third in as many generations. The blight, too, had been observed before repeatedly, sometimes in years in which it was not accompanied by any food shortages. The diseases which were such an important factor—typhus, typhoid, paratyphoid, dysentery, and others—though they were sometimes called "famine fevers," had been known for centuries. They did not always follow famine or precede it. In fact, if there was any single circumstance which might perhaps be regarded as concomitant with famine, it was poverty, invariably a companion of starvation.

Ireland was undoubtedly overpopulated in 1845, and many economic theorists then and since have cited Malthus' theory in relation to the famine. But even then some of these could see that the "pressure of population on the means of subsistence" was more probably an effect than a cause in an agrarian

economy which had retained many characteristics of its feudal past.

For feudalism was an economy which had actually *worked* in Ireland. That was why it lasted for so many hundreds of years. But the Irish economy had clung to many of the forms of economic and political privilege which the older system had made necessary, while dropping the responsibilities which went with them. Because of this such abuses as absentee landlordism had become usual, and poverty had become the normal condition of the peasantry.

Professors Edwards and Williams, of University College, Dublin, the editors of this history of the famine, have collected what must certainly be the best set of theses on its various angles which has as yet been brought together. It is here considered as a political, sociological, agricultural, and medical phenomenon, and well-considered from each angle by an able historian.

The chapters devoted to the Irish emigration and to the awful poverty of exploited land will be especially interesting.