

Extract from Roger Elkin's Interview with *Mandy Pannett* for the *Sentinel Literary Quarterly*

I've also just prepared for publication probably my most important work to date - important in terms of self-discovery - **That F Word** – 170 pages about the Great Irish Famine (1845-1850).

*Maybe you could say something more about **That F Word**. I believe you've been working on these poems for over a decade and are concerned to put the work into a wider historical context, not only the tragedies and oppressions of those years. How do you tackle such a vast and complex subject?*

The cycle came from a short-listing in Strokestown International Poetry Competition (May 2004), where I read alongside Paddy Bush, Bernard O'Donoghue, James Harpur and Mario Petrucci, among others. 90 miles due west of Dublin, the Strokestown House stables hold the Irish Famine Museum. It was obligatory (to chime with your word) to visit it, and with what result!

What initially attracted was seeing words new to me in the museum display cases - "clachan", "conacre", "rundale", "spalpeen", "booleying", "creaghting", "lazy beds", "tudal", "boreen". This sparked an investigation of the tragic events surrounding the potato blight: soup kitchens, task work, meal roads, evictions, emigration, coffin ships, government inadequacy and incompetence. Nearly 2.5 million Irish peasants were displaced, either by famine death or emigration to Canada or America - almost a quarter of the population. Ireland still hasn't recovered in population terms, let alone psychologically, from that ravaging and diaspora.

I read widely in history books, discovering such anomalies that while slave-owners got £20 million compensation for the abolition of the slave trade, and the Treasury fixed £70 million between 1854 and 1856 for the Crimean War, the British government gave only £7 million (less than ½% of GNP) spread over 5 years as famine relief in Ireland. I gradually understood this was a very complex historical event, with questions needing answers: such as was this a matter of Class warfare? Anglo-Irish divide? Religious bigotry? Governmental-directed genocide? Economic mismanagement? Colonial despoilment? Ecological disaster?

Simultaneously, I realized that while there were Famine Anthologies (by anonymous and contemporary poets, including Oscar Wilde's mother), no living poet had produced a body of creative work wide enough to contain these events. Yes, there were odd poems by the likes of Seamus Heaney, John Hewitt, and Eavan Boland, but surely such important events needed a voice. Here was my subject, although it was eight months before the first poem - in January 2005 while holidaying in Spain, in the first of what became 3 "red work-books" charting the whole cycle.

I note that the work involves two sequences – one involving real people and the other centred around a created character. Did you have this structure in mind from the start or did it take shape gradually as part of the writing process?

The two sequences evolved as the poems multiplied. Central to events was the Mahon family of Strokestown House - especially Major Denis, the first English aristocrat to be assassinated in the Famine. Clearly he and his forebears, the Earls of Hartland, had to feature. However, a political corrective related to class, a more earth-bound perspective was needed: that of the tenant peasant, suffering proscription, blight, famine and eviction, so I invented the character, *Dan Byrne*. He and his friends feature in 10 poems, ***Dan Byrne's Famine***, offered as foretaste in ***Dog's Eye View*** (2009).

I also found links with my own locality. For example, James Bateman of Biddulph Grange regularly contacted John Lindley, Secretary of the Royal Horticultural Society, who had the task of discovering the reason for the potato blight. Also John Talbot, sixteenth Earl of Shrewsbury, from nearby Alton Towers, Staffordshire. The country's leading Roman Catholic, with vast estates in England, Wexford and Waterford, he commissioned Pugin to build St Giles' church at Cheadle, at an initial cost of £4,000 which with all the artistic, architectural, sculptural decoration catapulted to £40,000 (over £29 million for labour costs alone in today's money!!!). The opening ceremony in September 1846 was attended by 20 priests, 10 bishops, 2 overseas archbishops (from Damascus and Sydney), and Crowned heads, statesmen and ambassadors from several European countries. I have not seen any reference to Talbot/Shrewsbury's support of his Irish peasantry; on the other hand, I haven't read that his Irish tenants underwent any suffering, unlike the evicted families of Mahon, Lord Palmerston or Lord Lucan.

More interestingly perhaps, and related to my fascination in language, is the use in contemporary letters by Strokestown's Father Michael McDermott of a term more usually associated with later historical events -

"holocaust". This suggested the English government's political mismanagement might have elements of genetic cleansing. Such matters give events wider relevance; and help forge links with famines in other countries - hence the "inclusiveness" of the title. For me famine is a dirtier word than fuck! The poems have helped me to join the dots ... historically, politically, personally. Perhaps, when published, it will help others similarly... In that way, I suppose, poetry has importance. It informs, educates, prompts, explains. And shocks! I just hope that in my obligation as a poet to tell events as I see them I've avoided Yeats' dictum "Out of the quarrel with others, we make rhetoric" in favour of his balancing comment "out of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry". But, it's a massive work, a difficult work which handles uncomfortable material. The problem isn't the writing of the poems; the problem's getting a publisher, one with enough guts to publish, and with an active distributor; and then arranging readings. I love readings. The real challenge is building a readership. But it could sell very well, both in the UK, and in Ireland and America.