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*Aiding Ireland: The Great Famine and the Rise of Transnational Philanthropy* by Anelise Hanson Shrout is a fascinating look at how various groups from around the world reacted to the famine in the mid-1800s in Ireland by donating funds to aid a starving population with whom they were not connected. Shrout's compelling research exposes the hidden motives behind the donations, and she challenges popular and frequently oversimplified tales about altruism during the famine without downplaying the kindness of contributors. In fact, Shrout argues convincingly that, as well as being motivated by philanthropic needs, many of the donors were consciously trying to make a political point that served their own purpose when giving to the Irish cause.

The Great Hunger of 1845-51 was precipitated by a European-wide failure of the potato crop, upon which about 20 percent of the Irish population depended for sustenance. The resultant food shortage led to the deaths of one million people while another two million emigrated, and it was one of the first mobilizations of global aid as people from diverse social, ethnic, and religious backgrounds donated to help those in need in Ireland.

Shrout examines the reactions of eight different groups in Europe and America, including Quaker abolitionists in Pennsylvania, poor tenant farmers in rural New York, the Black congregants of a Baptist church in Virginia, as well as slaveholders in Alabama, North and South Carolina, and Virginia, the Cherokee and Choctaw Nations, and poor laborers in England. Surprisingly, Shrout's research on these donations revealed little or no prior history of a relationship between Ireland and the organizations providing famine relief. Her research builds on previous works that examine who gave what, such as Christine Kinealy's *Charity and the Great Hunger in Ireland* (2013), by complicating the motives for this generosity.
The initial two chapters concentrate on relief from both the British and Irish governments and how various players exploited the crisis to advance political agendas, including free trade legislation and Irish nationalism. The next chapter looks at how, depending on the political goals of commentators, the famine was employed to both oppose and legitimize empires. Even though there was often anti-immigration prejudice demonstrated toward Irish refugees in cities throughout Britain, poor laborers in cities like Liverpool and Manchester also donated. Shrout argues that poor British workers felt affinity for the poverty experienced in Ireland, and their donations were a protest against the Corn Laws, which both artificially raised the cost of food and increased profits for landlords.

The majority of Aiding Ireland centers on the United States, and this is where Shrout’s research and argument are most original. The way that debates about aid for Ireland were entwined with the issue of America’s changing role within the British Empire is illustrated in chapter 4. She provides an insightful analysis of the New York Herald and the New York Tribune, two prestigious newspapers that positioned support for Irish families within the context of American party politics. The American press often used the Great Hunger as a way of discussing the ongoing imperialist actions of America in relation to Mexico and the annexation of Texas. Debates around a national approach to sending official aid to Ireland were debated in the press and in Congress, as was the choice between the expense of aiding a foreign country or continuing to wage an expensive war to claim Mexican territory. Other concerns were raised about the troubled relationship between Ireland and England, despite several hundred years of occupation, with opponents of American expansion claiming that it would lead to a long and expensive project with no happy end in sight.

Chapter 5 makes comparisons between the Anti-Rent War in New York State, a movement akin to Irish agricultural resistance, and the landlord system in Ireland. It is a useful comparison because, as Shrout demonstrates, American media openly drew comparisons between the circumstances in New York State and the British colony of Ireland during the famine. She discusses the campaigning of Thomas Ainge Devyr, a radical campaigner from Donegal who had escaped over the Atlantic Ocean a few years prior to the famine and who was particularly anti-landlord. Tenant farmers in rural New York who worked on small parcels of land on large estates around Albany often explicitly claimed solidarity against a landlord class. Their response to the crisis in Ireland, however, revealed divisions within the anti-rent movement, as militants urged the overthrow of land ownership by any means while others believed that the system could be leveraged to be more equitable.

Shrout examines the connection between famine relief and slavery in chapters 6 and 7. She demonstrates that enslavers and plantation owners often made public donations as a sign of their purported humanity. They falsely compared the Northern states’ opposition to slavery to that of the British colonial authorities. Furthermore, they used the state of Ireland’s peasantry as comparative “proof” that the plantation system—which provided them with their wealth—was far less harmful than abolitionists claimed.

Shrout contrasts this cynical attitude with the modest contributions from free and enslaved Black contributors, including members of the First African Baptist Church in Richmond, Virginia. The church had raised money since its founding in 1830 for church members but never before for people outside of the church, to say nothing of people in another country. She contends that these donations, which were a potential risk for the donors, contradicted the narrative of enslaver benevolence and represented a “deliberate use of white charitable norms to challenge white claims of black inhumanity” (p. 138). While newspapers
often listed the identities of the white donors, just like they did for the tenant farmers in upstate New York, the names of the Black donors or the reasons for their donations were rarely recorded in white-owned newspapers.

The last chapter of the book, which challenges popular perceptions of the well-known donations from the Choctaw and Cherokee Nations, is especially relevant today. Perhaps the most famous example of international aid is the story of the Choctaw Nation’s donation to Ireland, not long after their expulsion from their ancestral homelands in the American Southeast and forced resettlement in what is called the “Trail of Tears.” These contributions are typically lauded as a show of support from one persecuted people to another, but this often obscures the role Irish immigrants and their offspring played in the violent colonization of North America.

Christian missionaries claimed in the press that the donations demonstrated the successful assimilation of the Native Americans through their successful proselytizing efforts, arguing it was “evidence of civilization and Christian spirit existing among our red neighbors” (p. 164). Shrout argues, however, that the donations were intentional acts rejecting the condescending language used by settler-colonists and formed part of a tradition of generosity that existed before the efforts to subdue and “assimilate” the native population. Indigenous donations were also an attempt to show common cause with the starving and evicted Irish as the Nations drew parallels with their own experience at the hands of the American government and their repeated displacement from their own lands.

Although religion is discussed in several of the chapters, perhaps there could have been a more thorough examination of the more political aspects of famine-era religious philanthropy. Strout does discuss the Quakers, who played a critical humanitarian role in Ireland and abroad, but a more nuanced discussion of the actions of the Catholic Church, especially in contrast to the evangelical and proselytizing efforts of Protestants in North America and the Irish Church Missions, might have shed light on those motivations.

Shrout’s research is meticulous and thorough, and her conclusion that different donors had different and sometimes contradictory agendas for giving aid to Ireland is convincing. Her insights into the use of international philanthropy in America are intriguing and persuasive, and the book will ensure that scholars reexamine our understanding of nineteenth-century charity, which has already been ably written about by Maria Luddy in her Women and Philanthropy in Nineteenth-Century Ireland (1995) and Christine Kinealy’s work Charity and the Great Hunger in Ireland (2013). The fact that the famine was a versatile and pliable cause that could be marshaled for a range of ideological and political motives adds to our understanding of Irish history as well as the history of international charity. Her research has yielded a huge database of thousands of donors and their contributions, something that will surely continue to reveal more of this story as she uncovers other motives for strangers helping people with whom they were not intimately connected.

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