**LIBRETTO**

**MAUREEN MURPHY**

Asenath Nicholson was very modest. She doesn’t like to bring attention to herself but she did have a vanity, and that was her singing voice.

**ASENATH NICHOLSON**

I have seen and handled the black bread for months, and have told the story.

**MAUREEN MURPHY**

She wrote her book, *Ireland's Welcome to the Stranger*, which she published in 1847, to raise an awareness about the Irish poor and their suffering. By then, of course, they were into the second, actually the third year - going into the third year of the Great Irish Famine.

**ASENATH NICHOLSON**

Going out one cold day in a bleak waste on the coast, I met a pitiful old man in hunger and tatters with a child on his back, almost entirely naked, and to appearance in the last stages of starvation; whether his naked legs had been scratched, or whether the cold had affected them I knew not, but the blood was in small streams in different places, and the sight was a horrid one.

**PAUL KRUGMAN**

Famines. Very rarely is there, you know, literally not enough calories to keep everybody alive. So famines happen because most of the people are not getting the calories that — so they are always, at some level, economic. It’s about who has control of the resources. Was Ireland unique because of the tyranny of free market economics in British thought at the time? Probably not. Things like that have happened before, or have happened in other contexts. It’s not the only case but it was certainly the particular language that the government in London took to justify doing nothing to keep people from dying, was couched in classical political economy, because that was the language in which people rationalized injustice in the mid 19th century.

**MAN**

‘S a hUain Ghil Bheannaithe

Na Trua is a hUain

Na Trua is a hUain Ghil Bheannaithe

Fúascail ar ainnise athá nár gcrá

Ná lig ar strae Uait Féin an t-anam bocht

Is a fheabhas a cheannaigh tú é sa Pháis

*Lamb of God*

*Pity, Lamb*

*Pity, Lamb of God*

*Save us from misery*

*Don’t abandon the poor soul*

*That you redeemed on the cross*

**BRANKO MILANOVIC**

You know, one has actually to extend it further to the present days, because very often there — Of course, catastrophes they happen today, which may be likewise, sort of, decided by those who have power, not to interfere because it’s a market system. So you might have a situation of really extreme poverty. I mean, I think today people would generally interfere when it comes to famine but they might not interfere with other things.

**MAUREEN MURPHY**

Nicholson, who walked through Ireland in 1844 and 1845, kept pointing out to the British government that if they would invest in jobs, in creation of employment, they would not have to build the workhouses. She was concerned about the single food source because she worked among — she lived and worked and walked among the Irish poor. And they said, “We’re eating the potato all the time. There’s nothing. It’s a curse. That’s the only thing that we have.” So she realized that they were living just on the brink of disaster.

**ASENATH NICHOLSON**

The old man was interrogated why he took such an object into sight, upon the street, when he answered that he lived seven miles off, and was afraid the child would die in the cabin, with two little children he had left starving, and he had come to get the bit of meal, as it was the day that the relief was giving out.  The officer told him he had not time to enter his name on the book, and he was sent away in that condition; a penny or two was given him, for which he expressed the greatest gratitude; this was Wednesday or Thursday.

**MEGAN VAUGHAN**

So not everyone is in favour of providing relief when people are starving, because the politics of the administration of that relief and the manipulation of that relief are quite complicated.

**MAN**

A trua

Agus a leanna

Go dté a dhéanfaigh mé

Tá tú ar shiúl uaim

Ochón ochón

*Oh pity*

*And my child*

*What will I do*

*You have gone from me*

*Alas*

**ASENATH NICHOLSON**

The next Saturday, on my way from the house where the relieving-officer was stationed, we saw an old man creeping slowly in a bending posture upon the road. The same old man looked up and recognized me*.*

**MAN**

Agus ó a thrua

*And oh pity*

**ASENATH NICHOLSON**

I did not know him, but his overwhelming thanks for the little that was given him that day, called to mind the circumstance. And*,* inquiring where the child was, he said the three were left in the cabin, and had not taken a “sup nor a bit” since yesterday morning, and he was afraid some of them would be dead upon the hearth when he returned.

**PAUL KRUGMAN**

One thing you want to say is that the English were pretty harsh on their own poor people, too. They were. So at the same time people were saying, oh, you know, helping the poor just encourages, just increases the supply of beggars — you know, that sort of thing. So it was a pretty brutal ideology all around.

**MAN**

Agus ó a thrua

Agus a Neilí

*Oh pity*

*And my Nelly*

**MEGAN VAUGHAN**

You can pinpoint cases where free market ideology has been applied in such a rigid and ideological way, combined with a colonial system, that you could certainly lay the blame for, at least some of the consequences on the way in which that ideology has been, if you like, applied.

**ASENATH NICHOLSON**

The relieving officer had told him to come on Saturday, and his name should be on the book, he waited without scarcely eating a mouthful till then, and was so weak he could not carry the child, and had crept the seven miles to get the meal, and was sent away with a promise to wait till next Tuesday, and come and have his name on the books.

This poor man had not a penny nor a mouthful of food, and he said tremulously, “I must go home and die on the hearth with the hungry ones.”  The mother had starved to death.

**MAN**

A trua

Agus a leanna

Go dté a dheanfaidh mé

Tá tú ar shiúl uaim

Agus ó a thrua

Agus a Neilí

Níl duine ar bith agam

‘S ó a thrua

Agus mé liom fhéin

Dá meitheá go maith agam

Agus och och ochón inniu

*Oh pity*

*And my child*

*What will I do?*

*You have gone from me*

*Oh pity*

*And my Nelly*

*I have no one now*

*And oh pity*

*And me on my own*

*If I had you healthy here now*

*And alas today*

**BRANKO MILANOVIC**

What I found interesting is, of course, that the Irish Great Hunger actually happened during the time when the first inequality in the UK, or actually, in England, rather that we have have the data for, was extremely high. And, that was the period, of course, of the Industrial Revolution.

**PAUL KRUGMAN**

I would say the big problem with charity is it’s almost never enough. It’s probably not enough in extreme events like a famine, and it’s certainly—it might be enough to deal with the ordinary amount of malnutrition and starvation that happens in a poor place. The fact of the matter is that the amount of money it takes to seriously alleviate poverty on an ongoing basis is more than you’re ever going to get in the form of private donations.

**ASENATH NICHOLSON**

He was given money to purchase seven pounds of meal; he clasped his old emaciated hands, first fell upon his knees, looked up to heaven and thanked the good God, then me

**MAN**

Agus mé liom fhéin

Dá meitheá go maith agam

Agus och och ochón inniu.

*And me on my own*

*If you were well now*

*And alas today*

**ASENATH NICHOLSON**

The old man kept on his knees, walking on them, pausing and looking up to heaven; and thinking myself that seven pounds would not keep four scarcely in existence till Tuesday, we stopped till he came upon his knees to the car~~;~~ he was given money to purchase as much more...

**MAUREEN MURPHY**

She was someone who not only walked around and investigated as many travellers did — there were a number of travellers who came through Ireland in the pre-Famine time -– but she got down off the coach. She went into houses.

**ASENATH NICHOLSON**

...when for a few moments, I feared that he would die on the path.

**MAUREEN MURPHY**

And she went and she sat in with the Irish poor, she stayed with them, she ate the potato, drank a mug of water...

**ASENATH NICHOLSON**

His age, exhaustion by hunger, and the feelings of a father, together with the sudden change, from despair to hope, all were so powerful, that with his hands clasped, clinching his pennies, and standing up on his knees, he fell upon his face, and for some time remained there.

**MAUREEN MURPHY**

So she stepped through the threshold, she stepped over the threshold, and she lived among the people and she knew them and developed a great, great sympathy and great understanding. She was a historian who was a participant.

**ASENATH NICHOLSON**

He was finally restored to his knees, and the last glimpse we had of this picture of living death, he was behind us on the path, descending a hill upon his knees.

What his destiny was, I never knew; but the relieving officer expressed no feelings of compunction when told of it some time after, nor did he know whether he had applied again.  “If he died, what then?” was the answer.

**MAN**

Beidh Rí na Glóire

A Dhia na Glóire fós

A Rí na dTrua s’a hUain Ghil Bheannaithe

Na Glóire fós 's ag freagairt dóibh

Beidh an dá aspal déag mar bhacaigh ceart

Beidh an dá aspal déag gur déanamh dóibh caradais

Sin stór ná beidh caite acu go Lá an Bhrátha

Ná lig ar strae Uait Féin an

Na dTrua s’a hUain s’a hUain

A dTrua s’a hUain Ghil Bheannaithe

Fuascail ár ainnise atá dár gcrá,

Ná lig ar strae Uait Féin an t-anam bocht

Is a fheabhas a cheannaigh Tú é sa Pháis

Na dTrua s’a hUain s’a hUain

Mar a chéim, a chéim, an chéim réidh,

An chéim seo eadrainn

Oscail ár gcroí is díbir an ghangaid as

Lig braon de Do fhíorspiorad arís chun ár gcneasaithe

Mar gheall ar an

Tá na bochta

Ní hé Dia a cheap

Na dTrua s’a hUain s’a hUain

Na dTrua s’a hUain Ghil Bheannaithe

Na Glóire fós 's

Ag freagairt dóibh

Ag freagairt dóibh

Is uaisle na bhFlaitheas

Go ngabhaid i bharr

*King of Glory*

*God of Glory save us*

*King of pity, Lamb of God*

*Save and answer us*

*The twelve apostles will be crippled*

*The twelve apostles will welcome us*

*These treasures wait at Judgement Day*

*Don’t abandon us*

*His Lamb, his Lamb*

*Pity, Lamb of God*

*Deliver us from this agony*

*Don’t abandon us*

*You whose passion saved us*

*Pity, Lamb*

*That this has come to pass*

*Open our hearts, drive out this poison*

*Send Your spirit to heal us*

*On account of*

*The poor are*

*It can’t be God that*

*Pity, Lamb*

*Blessed Lamb of God*

*Glory, save us*

*Answer us*

*Answer us*

*May the Angels let us rest*

**SOUND OF YOUNG WOMAN KEENING**

A trua

Agus a leanna

Go dté a dheanfaidh mé

Tá tú ar shiúl uaim

Agus ó a thrua

Agus a Neilí

Níl duine ar bith agam

‘S ó a thrua

Agus mé liom fhéin

Dá meitheá go maith agam

Agus och och ochón inniu

*Oh pity*

*And my child*

*What will I do?*

*You have gone from me*

*Oh pity*

*And my Nelly*

*I have no one now*

*Oh pity*

*And me on my own*

*If you were well now*

*And alas today*

**MAN**

Agus och och ochón inniu

Agus mé liom fhéin

Dá meitheá go maith agam

Agus och och ochón inniu

*And alas today*

*And me on my own*

*If you were well now*

*Alas today*

**ASENATH NICHOLSON**

Agus och och ochón inniu

*And alas today*

**BRANKO MILANOVIC**

Yeah, I think there are actually very significant segments of economists and people who actually believe first that inequality is necessary. But I think actually there is a prior belief there. And the belief is that if there is a market system, whatever the outcome is, is an outcome which is just.

**MAUREEN MURPHY**

Many people commenting on the Great Irish Famine talk about food leaving the country, whether it was livestock or grain. And it’s interesting to see them going from exporting cattle and sheep to calves and lambs, which mean that they were “selling short”, as it were.

**NOAM CHOMSKY**

As I’m sure you know, the British had the same policies with the Victorian famines in India. India was exporting food to England right in the midst of the famine. Actually Churchill did that. And while the famine was going on, Churchill insisted that Indian grain be sent to England so that people in England could have white bread because they like white bread.

**MAUREEN MURPHY**

There is, as I say, a complete reluctance to interfere with the free market economy.

**NOAM CHOMSKY**

Which is a total fraud, of course, because you can interfere with the market as much as you like to support the rich and powerful.

**ASENATH NICHOLSON**

The blast of the desert comes,

Her loose hair flew on the wind.

**MEGAN VAUGHAN**

The victim-blaming kind of arguments that colonial rulers produce in these contexts are, I think, quite similar from place to place… the idea that it’s somehow colonial peoples, through their inferiority are unable to — are sort of not sufficiently — are not working hard enough to support themselves and are dissolute in various ways.

**MAN**

A trua

Agus a leanna

Go dté a dheanfaidh mé

Tá tú ar shiúl uaim

Ochón ochón

*Oh pity*

*And my child*

*What will I do?*

*You have gone from me*

*And alas today*

**ASENATH NICHOLSON**

I saw the brown silken hair of a young girl waving gently through a cleft of stones.

**MAN**

Agus ó a thrua

Agus a Neilí

*And oh pity*

*And my Nelly*

**ASENATH NICHOLSON**

A little grass was pulled and spread over, and then covered with stones. I shall never forget it.

**BRANKO MILANOVIC**

The moral aspect has one element which is, I think— everybody finds it — particularly if you’re at the receiving end of that, you’re already probably unhappy being poor, or, in the extreme case, we talk about like even dying from that. And on top of that, somebody who is richer and who is actually having a nice time is telling you that somehow that punishment is deserved, and that he, that it’s deserved, and that he’s morally superior to you.

**MAN**

Agus mé liom fhéin

Dá meitheá go maith agam

*And me on my own*

*If I had you healthy here now*

**ASENATH NICHOLSON**

I never shall forget it.

I shall never forget.

**NOAM CHOMSKY**

Ireland was a colony, so the British could treat it by the principles of “sound economics” and “don’t interfere with the market” and “they should export food because the economics says that’s better for everyone.” If they starve, that’s not our problem.

**PAUL KRUGMAN**

If you think that what happened during the Irish Famine was a unique kind of inhumanity that couldn’t possibly happen in the 21st century, people don’t change that much.

**MAN**

Agus och och ochón inniu

*And alas today*

**ASENATH NICHOLSON**

Oh! the scenes of the dreadful winter! Who can ever forget? We landed, not buoyantly, upon the once pretty island of Arranmore. The first that called my attention was the death-like stillness – nothing of life was seen or heard, excepting occasionally a dog. These look so unlike all others I had seen among the poor, I unwittingly said – “how can the dogs look so fat, and shining here, where there is no food for the people?”

I shall never forget.

The sleek dogs of Arranmore were my horror, my hatred, and have stamped on my mind images which can never be effaced.

**MEGAN VAUGHAN**

I don’t think that famine is, in any way, inevitable in the world today. I mean there’s absolutely no reason why people should be starving to death.

**ASENATH NICHOLSON**

I shall never forget it.

**MAN**

Dá meitheá go maith agam

*If you were well now*

**ASENATH NICHOLSON**

I shall never forget.

I have been riding and walking through desolate Erris, and in worse than despair, have sat down, asking – what am I to do? What can I do?

Every effort of the friends of Ireland is baffled by the demoralizing effects that feeding a starving peasantry without labor has produced. My heart sickens at looking over the utter wasting of all that was once cheerful, interesting and kind in these peasantry.

**MAN**

Dá meitheá go maith agam

*If you were well now*

**ASENATH NICHOLSON**

Where are your men of moral, yes, of spiritual might? You have them, then bring them out! I look across that narrow channel. I see the graves of martyrs. I see the graves of men whose daring minds stood forth in a majesty of greatness to speak for truth and justice; and though they may long since have taken flight, where are their mantles? Where is your George Thompson? He who shook the United States from Maine to Georgia in pleading long and loud for the downtrodden Black man? Can he not, will he not lift his voice for poor Ireland? She who stands shivering, sinking on the Isthmus, between two worlds, apparently not fit for either. Will he not reach forth a kindly hand and try to snatch this once interesting and lovely, though now forlorn and forsaken creature, from her fearful position?

**MAN**

A Dhia na glóire

*Oh God of Glory*

**ASENATH NICHOLSON**

Must she?

**MAN**

Fóir is freagair sinn

*Hear and answer us*

**ASENATH NICHOLSON**

Must she, shall she die? Will proud England lose so bright a gem as Ireland might have been in her crown?

Do you say she is intriguing, she is indolent and treacherous? Try her once more; put instruments of working warfare into her hands; hold up the soul-stirring stimulus of remuneration to her.

**MEGAN VAUGHAN**

Famine I don’t think really did serve them in any very straightforward way. When I first started researching this late colonial famine in Malawi, which happened in 1949, I found that in — when looking at the British colonial records, quite a lot of those records are being destroyed. And I suspected and I still suspect that they were destroyed because this was an embarrassment.

One thing you weren’t supposed to allow to happen on your watch was for people to die in great numbers.

**MAN**

Tá na bochta ag plé leis an ainnise

*The poor live in misery*

**MEGAN VAUGHAN**

However, I mean, there are examples of African governments who have manipulated famine, and famine relief, in such a way as to quite deliberately starve different communities within nations. In Sudan, the case of the Sudan is an example of that.

**MAN**

A trua

*Oh pity*

**BRANKO MILANOVIC**

It is very difficult often times to actually visualize things that are far from you, and you can see it maybe in the news, and so on, but it’s not really striking you directly.

**MAN**

Ar an bheatha seo!

*On this earth!*

**PAUL KRUGMAN**

That’s a fantasy that people have, that there’s this sort of, purge, cleansing effect of crises. I mean for what, to the extent that we know something about this, it looks quite the opposite, it looks like having a crisis inflicts enormous damage that takes decades to eliminate.

**MAUREEN MURPHY**

What amazes me, when we look, comparatively speaking, with all of our resources today, with all of our improvements in transportation and communication, we still can’t get the food to the people who need it.

**MEGAN VAUGHAN**

So it’s not, if you like, the number of calories that were available, or the number of deaths taking place, it’s the sense of a social breakdown.

**BRANKO MILANOVIC**

I think we are all guilty to some extent of blocking certain death, or giving them less importance than the others.

I think Adam Smith asked that, and I think Dostoyevsky asked also, is whether, you know, whether you would let, I don’t know, I think it’s in Adam Smith, it’s a question whether you would lose your little finger if it would save three lives in China, without anybody knowing that that was a trade-off that you have made. Because everybody would say “yes I would do that” if everybody else knows that this is a trade-off that you’re having, but let’s suppose that nobody knows that, so would we be willing to do that? And I think it’s still a very pertinent question, how much would you be willing to sacrifice of your own? I think that we all, each of us, has to ask that question.

**MAN**

A trua

*Oh pity*

**ASENATH NICHOLSON**

The dark night had come, my trunk was packed, and the vessel was in readiness that was to bear me away.

**OLD RECORDING OF OLD MAN SINGING**

Fear gan chéill a bheadh ag dréim leis an chlaidhe atá ard  
Is ar an chlaidhe bheag íseal a leag mé mo lámh  
Cé gur ard an crann caorthainn bídh sé searbh as a bharr  
Fásfaidh sméara agus bláth sú craobh ar an chrann is ísle bláth

*Only a man without sense would try to climb a high wall*

*With a low wall at his side on which he could lay his hand*

*Although the rowan tree grows high, its food is bitter at the top*

*The berries and raspberry blossoms grow on the lowest tree*

**ASENATH NICHOLSON**

The spires of Dublin could not be seen, and I was glad – I was glad that they could not find me; for them I had labored, and their blessing was mine, that was a rich reward; when my heart shall cease to feel for their sufferings may my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth.

**MAN**

Cé gur ard an crann caorthainn bídh sé searbh as a bharr  
Fásfaidh sméara agus bláth sú craobh ar an chrann is ísle bláth

*Although the rowan tree grows high, its food is bitter at the top*

*The berries and raspberry blossoms grow on the lowest tree*