

# Ireland in New York

**Fintan  
Cullen**

Brian Tolle's *Irish Hunger Memorial* which occupies a half acre site in lower Manhattan, on the intersection of North End Avenue and Vesey Street, was unveiled in 2002. It commemorates the Irish Famine of the 1840s and the huge numbers of Irish men and women who migrated to North America. Financed to the tune of about \$5 million by Battery Park City Authority, it is one of a number of ethnic sculptural groups in the park, skirting the waterfront. One of the recent additions to the area is Andy Goldsworthy's roof sculptures of hollowed rock with saplings for the Museum of Jewish Heritage. Others date from as far back as the 1920s and include a memorial to Walloon settlers from the Netherlands, while later a memorial commemorates veterans of the Korean War. In the context of its appearance and its theme, as well as its site in a park filled with memorials to other cultures who have come to New York, the recent appearance of this memorial raises the issue of an Irish presence in New York. That presence is significant and has been recorded in graphic art, literature, song, film and anecdote. While these earlier acknowledgements of Ireland's role in New York were often tinged with humour, Tolle's *Irish Hunger Memorial* is deadly serious. It focuses on deprivation, diaspora as well as survival. An account of the creation of the memorial also raises the question as to who owns Irish history in New York.

The *Irish Hunger Memorial* is composed of a huge concrete platform measuring 96 x 170 feet (about a quarter acre of land), an area that equals the maximum size plot farmers could hold in order to qualify for Government aid during the Famine in the 1840s (a law known as the Gregory clause after William Gregory, later husband to Augusta Persse, or Lady Gregory). Although the memorial's overall design is by Brian Tolle, a New York City based artist born in 1964, the implementation of the technical aspects of the platform and its subterranean passage was the work of the firm 1100 Architect. Other important contributors to its creation include landscape architect Gail Wittwer, historian Maureen O'Rourke-Murphy and the computer artist Brian Clyne. Consisting of a roofless Irish cottage leading to a meadow of Irish grasses, the memorial includes a meandering path dotted with stones etched with the names of Ireland's thirty-two counties leading

up to the summit of the platform, which allows one to look out over the Hudson; below in a subterranean passage one encounters didactic material, inscriptions and voiceovers, all relating to the specifics of Ireland's famine history and, more generally, to the ongoing struggle to feed the world's population.

In 1873, Friedrich Nietzsche famously categorised history into three parts: monumental, antiquarian and critical. The monumental, he claimed, inspires and encourages, it is celebratory; the antiquarian is all about preservation and ritual; while the critical is about breaking things down, asking questions and attempting to work out what is important. Using Nietzsche's criteria, Tolle's New York memorial to the Irish Hunger could be seen as a monumental reaction to history. It is certainly monumental in scale but, more importantly in Nietzschean terms, it is about inspiring its viewers to reflect on the past and, in the context of the location of the monument in New York, on achievement. Its setting within New York's financial district is important as it asks one to recognise how the descendants of the stone cottage, the people from all those counties etched on the stones, came to America and survived. It also has elements of Nietzsche's 'antiquarianism', as the memorial is made up of a preserved cottage from County Mayo and of wild grasses that originally grew in rural Ireland. It is 'critical' too, in that it asks us to reflect on migration and survival in the nineteenth century. From what the artist has said in interviews, he was very conscious of the well-known deserted village in Slievemore, on the island of Achill in County Mayo, and the dramatic profile that it makes against the backdrop of that island. As seen from the intersection of North End Avenue and Vesey Street, the *Irish Hunger Memorial* has a comparable dramatic profile. Meanwhile, in the corridor of recorded voices, the memorial asks us to reflect on past and current disasters and issues that affect the world.

Beyond having affinities with the Nietzschean definition of history, one must also reflect on whether Tolle's creation has anything to do with the specifics of Irish-American history and, even more locally, with Irish-New York history? Or does the monument only relate to Ireland? In 1996, a major exhibition was mounted at the Museum of the City of New York (MCNY), situated on Fifth Avenue, some blocks north of the Guggenheim Museum. Entitled 'Gaelic Gotham: A History of



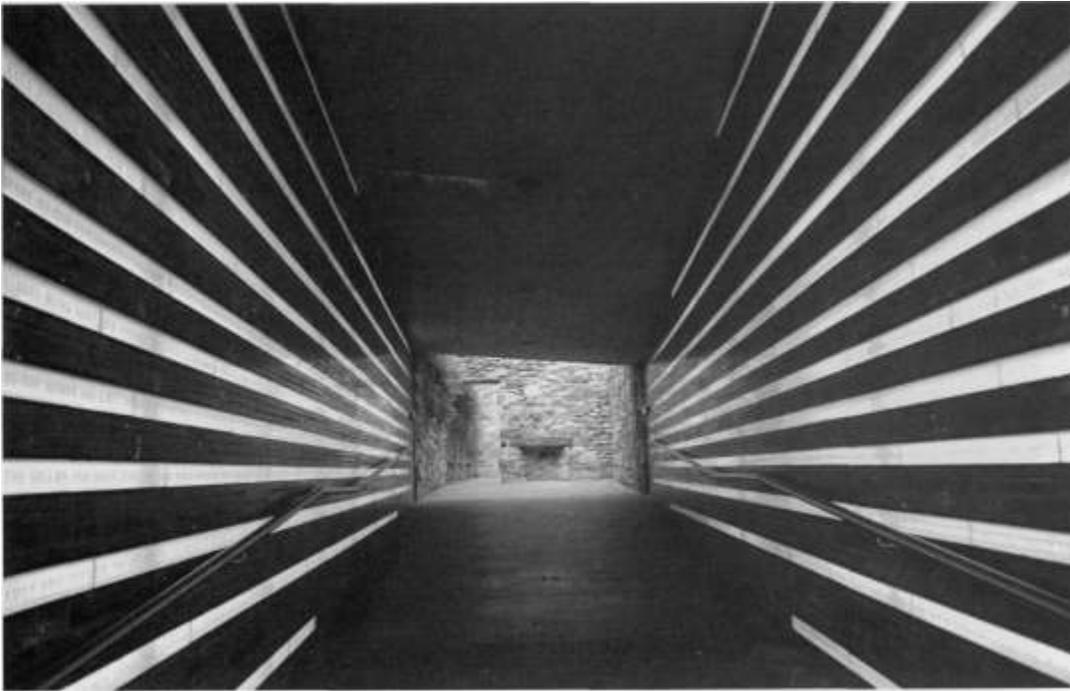
Brian Tolle, Irish Hunger Memorial, New York City, unveiled 2002.  
Credit: Nicoleta Coman/Brian Tolle Studio

the Irish in New York', the exhibition was beset by controversy from long before it opened, as its choice of items for exhibition and the display divisions chosen to tell its story were criticized by the New York Irish History Roundtable and academics connected with New York and Columbia Universities. They saw the exhibition as not being proper history or, as one of the critics had it, the 'museum refused to hear the voice of Irish New York' (Marion Casey in *Irish Echo*, 21-27 Feb. 1996, quoted in Kenny 811). In a report about the exhibition and the curatorial experience, published a year later in 1997, the critics of the Museum of the City of New York show claimed that three quarters of the objects on display came from what they called 'non-ethnic collections' (*The Gaelic Gotham Report*), such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, and that overall the exhibition had a nineteenth-century emphasis. For example, one art object included in the exhibition, a *trompe l'oeil* painting by the Irish-born William Michael Harnett (1848-92), makes reference to Thomas Moore's melody about Glendalough and St Kevin, 'By that lake whose gloomy shore'. It is true that the show had quite a conventional narrative, told through visual and material objects, paintings, prints and, in one case, the contents of a steamer trunk owned by an Irishwoman who arrived in New York at the turn of the century to work as a domestic servant. The exhibits

very specific Irish references to others which had a certain generality about them, that is, they referred to the theme of migration that affects all cultures who entered New York. As a museum of the city of New York, the MCNY claimed, quite understandably, that it was mounting an exhibition *about* the Irish in New York. As MCNY's director, Robert Macdonald, is quoted as having said, 'it was not an exhibition *for* the Irish but *for all* New Yorkers, whether Irish or not' (Rogers 11; my italics). In this it was part of a series of exhibitions dealing with ethnic groups, for example, Jewish New York or Puerto Rican New York. In their letters to New York and Dublin newspapers, as well as in other documents, the Roundtable seemed to want the exhibition to be *for* the Irish in New York.

In a very even-handed review of the 'Gaelic Gotham' exhibition in *American Quarterly*, Kevin Kenny recounts the saga that I have just briefly outlined, but here I wish to ask a comparable question about Brian Tolle's *Irish Hunger Memorial* created by the Battery Park City Authority. Is it about the Irish and global experience or is it just for a group, in this case, Irish Americans? The same question could be asked of historical displays of Ireland in New York as far back as 1939 when Ireland featured in a world fair held in Flushing Meadows. The ground plan of architect Michael Scott's Irish Pavilion resembled a shamrock while an outside pool was shaped in the form of the map of Ireland. The Irish Pavilion was not *for* the Irish in New York but to display the products of a modern nation less than twenty years after independence to a world audience. Indeed, the overall theme of the fair was 'The World of Tomorrow'. For an Irish visual spectacle that was more *for* the Irish we have to go back even earlier, some forty years before the Scott pavilion to 1897. At that New York fair, this time in Grand Central Palace on Lexington Avenue, another map of Ireland featured as a huge flooring with 'the veritable soil' of each of the thirty-two counties placed in their exact geographical position. As Fintan O'Toole has written of the 1897 fair, the 'Irish immigrant could feel under foot the land itself, the literal ould sod' (160). And as the New York *Irish World* related in its account of the fair, one eighty-year-old woman from Fermanagh was seen kneeling amidst her county's soil, 'crossing herself and saying her prayers (quoted in O'Toole 160).

My point is that, in assessing the value or usefulness of Tolle's *Irish Hunger Memorial* in New York, we need to distinguish between how it is *about* one group's experience, the migration of millions of Irishmen and women in the nineteenth century, as opposed to it being *for* that particular ethnic group, Irish New Yorkers who, as we know, form a prominent part of the city's population. Commentators on the monument have suggested that the memorial has a greater audience than just one ethnic group. Writing in the *New Yorker* in 2002, the historian Simon Schama has claimed that 'the grassy hill, a piece of the auld sod' is 'stripped of sentimentality but not of emotion' (276). It is, he has said, 'a space of meditation: how could the greatest famine in nineteenth-century Europe have persisted in the back yard of the wealthiest empire in the world?' (276). The philosopher



Brian Tolle, Irish Hunger Memorial, New York City, unveiled 2002. Credit: Nicoleta Coman/Brian Tolle Studio

Richard Kearney, sees it as 'an exchange between home and abroad, between the old world and the new, between Achill Island and Manhattan Island ... between past and present' (315).

It is easy to be caustic and negative about famine memorials, and about how the plethora of sculptural monuments both in Ireland and further afield in recent years is a kind of 'appropriation' by the Irish of the issue of suffering and, in particular, famine. History has indeed been abused in the process. As President of Ireland, Mary Robinson in 1995, referring to events in Somalia, spoke of how 'the past gave Ireland a moral viewpoint and a historically informed compassion on some of the events happening now' (quoted in 6 Grada, *Ireland's Great Famine* 196).

More recently, the singer Bono has been quoted as praising the Irish government for tackling poverty in Africa as such concern 'was an intrinsic part of the Irish psyche arising out of our experience of the Famine' (Kelleher i). All of this rhetoric is something of an Irish invention. As the economic historian, Cormac 6 Grada has pointed out, in the heavily urbanised Ireland of today and of New York City as well, 'famine memory' owes more to popular history, local historians and a strong tradition of missionary activity in what we now call the Third World. It is not, necessarily intrinsically part of the Irish psyche (6 Grada, *Black '47* 4).

One could see the New York memorial as kitsch. In many areas it is very literal — the inscribed stones listing the counties of Ireland; the old roofless cottage which has become a standardised trope of traditional Ireland; the rich field of wild grasses growing in the very soil of Ireland which, as precedent informs us, had so transfixed that old woman from Fermanagh back in 1897. A three-dimensional version, we could almost say, of what Liam Kennedy has called the MOPE school of Irish history: the Most Oppressed People Ever. Yet, the Tolle memorial is more than that; it is not really an Irish memorial or even a New York memorial. Its location next to what has now become known as Ground Zero has, in many ways, been the making of it. The obvious vulnerability of the New York financial district makes us think harder about international connections. As Fredric Jameson has reminded us, it is the nature of memorials to be artificial, but then all art is artificial, it just suggests things. Art is a worked out series of ideas in visual form, it is the result of a period of gestation and thought. Equally, the transnational nature of the Irish Hunger memorial is its great virtue. We have an Irish cottage and field in New York but downstairs we are asked to consider a bigger world. That request takes us into a realm beyond kitsch. According to Clement Greenberg writing in 1939, kitsch is preoccupied with narrative and leaves little to the imagination. Little effort is needed to grasp the message that one wallows



Brian Tolle, Irish Hunger Memorial, New York City, unveiled 2002. Credit: Nicoleta Coman/Brian Tolle Studio

in nostalgia. More recently, David Lloyd in the context of Irish Studies, has defined kitsch as 'congealed memory', one where the original culture (Ireland) has become mere recreation and there is a 'failure to transmit the past' (Lloyd 91). This is not the case with the New York memorial. Tolle's *Irish Hunger Memorial* does not tell one story; yes, Ireland plays a starring role in the concept, but the monument is *about* something bigger. The cottage and the waving grasses do suggest a particular place but the authenticity of the stones and the vegetation do not reduce the visitor to uttering sentimental clichés. The monument is not just *for* one group and their tragic story. It is bigger than one story. In the end, the monument is involved in critical history, but with aspects of Nietzsche's monumentality and an element of the antiquarian.

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