

Singing the Great Famine

With *Chronicles Of The Great Irish Famine*, Declan O'Rourke mines the darkest corners of the horrors of the Irish famine with a sensitivity that animates a raft of highly personal stories.

"Around 2000 or so, I learned that my granddad was born in a workhouse in Gort," O'Rourke recalls, recounting the intrigue he felt at that discovery. "I didn't really know what that meant but I wanted to find out more about it. About two months later, when I came across John O'Connor's *The Workhouses of Ireland* book. I opened it up on the bus on the way home that evening, and it hit me between the eyes. I had no idea that the workhouses had anything to do with the famine. I didn't know much about the famine at all, the same as everybody else.

"But the first page had this very human story about this family from Macroom: how this man carried his wife home from the workhouse, mile after weary mile. He got back to their little cottage. She was dying. He tried to keep her feet warm, holding them to his chest, and they found them both like that the next morning. I was just floored, and wanted to write about it straightaway."

As O'Rourke worked his way through the book, he encountered countless other personal stories and it dawned on him that one song wasn't going to do it.

O'Rourke just kept reading and reading. About 25 books in all. And the more he read, the more he came to the understanding that, as the late Dublin singer and song collector Frank Harte said: "Those in power write the history, while those who suffer write the songs."

Fear and loathing played no small part in colouring the historical accounts of that time, O'Rourke insists. And it was something he felt he could counter through his own writing.

"Most of the poor were illiterate, or not literate is a better way to say it, I think," he says. "It's understandable that people didn't want to talk about it: the fear of it happening again; the trauma. I only realised that recently when someone said to me that it'd be great to go around schools and teach this, and I thought 'how could you explain that to children? How could you actually describe hundreds of thousands of people starving to death all across the country?' And that's the first time I really understood why people didn't want to talk about it. Above all else, I consider myself a storyteller. That's where I feel most natural, writing," he says. I don't know whether that's a cultural thing. I think it's our human way of communicating. And I think you have to be gripped by a story in order to be able to write about it yourself. You write about what moves you.

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