The Boston Irish Famine Memorial

Erected in 1998 the Boston Irish Famine Memorial was created in memory of the struggles faced by people in Ireland during the Great Famine. The famine itself lasted from 1845-1849, however the effects on the world as a whole lasted far longer. One such place that was affected was Boston. Because of the famine plaguing Ireland many people immigrated to the United States in order to escape the horrors faced back at home. This memorial does try to emphasize the role that Boston specifically played in the assistance of those in Ireland. The plaque depicted here states: “This memorial remembers the famine, known in Irish as An Gorta Mor. It depicts the Irish exodus from their homeland, their arrival in Boston and ultimate triumph over adversity in America”\(^1\). The way that this is phrased is key to understanding how Bostonians wanted to present themselves in this memorial. They wanted to come off as saviors of the Irish, that everything was bad until they got to America, and once they were here everything was perfect. This can clearly be seen in the presentation of the monument as well. The prosperous family in America is standing tall and proud high above the people looking upon the monument, while the poor and hungry family in Ireland is nearly at eye level. Even if both are on pedestals one can clearly see how different each family is to one another. The families and what they represent sparked controversy among viewers over how well the message came through. Fintan O’Toole of the Irish Times expressed concern that the representation of the “filled with hope and determination” makes this memorial a kitsch.\(^2\) The fact that the family was supposed to be

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\(^1\) “An Gorta Mor,” The Boston Irish Famine Memorial, 1998.
depicted as just arriving to the shores of America, yet they already look healthy and wealthy, call
into question how that may downplay the great strife faced by the Irish people. If all it takes is
just coming ashore to become perfectly healthy, the struggles not only faced directly from the
famine, but their perseverance to actually get to America, belittle the actual power and strength
of the Irish people. This memorial, while said to be in dedication to the famine, truly is a
dedication to Boston’s role in “saving” people from the famine. While it is unquestionable that
Boston did make efforts to relieve the Irish people of some struggle through their efforts in
sending over food and supplies, this memorial is glorifying Boston’s role. Now this is not to say
that intentions may have been all bad. The memorial was created in remembrance of the 150th
anniversary of the Great Famine, strategically placed near where the Irish immigrants would
have first docked in Boston. Some level of this memorial had to be important to people as one
million dollars was spent making it with several pillars to convey the history and meaning of the
Famine. One such pillar could possibly try and refute what visually can be seen in the message of
the families. “Crossing the Bowl of Tears” recounts the peril faced by those trying to escape
Ireland, boarding “coffin ships” and dying in their fight for survival.3 There is only so much this
message can refute though. One specific feature of this memorial that caught my attention was
the expression held by the woman on the “prosperius immigrant” side. The woman seems to
glare and look down upon the people struggling on the other pedestal, this was an odd choice for
the designers to make as it would seem that the immigrant did not care for those that struggled
while she was supposedly free. This glare, said to be a look of determination, is not well placed
as it faces the people who still struggle in Ireland, not looking forward or up in a manner akin to
pushing past barriers. The statue that does face toward the sky is that of “The People Were

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3Kaushik Patowary, “The Coffin Ships of The Great Irish Famine,” Amusing Planet, Blogger,
August 19, 2020,
Gaunt”. The desperate plea to the heavens depicted does not do anything to demonstrate what those individuals did to actually get out of those situations. The memorial was not well received for many years and thus was left to the pigeon poo, at one point an art critic by the name of Gregg Cook even got this memorial nominated for The Worst Public Art in New England. Cook had expressed that he was not trying to just spit on the memorial, but that it was poorly done and, as similarly stated before, was in bad taste. Whether or not the people are in agreement on the validity of this memorial is of little consequence today. Now this space, school park, is mostly used as a place for people to relax, take a break, and stop to eat. Families bring their children to teach them about history, and adults wander over to learn something new about an event they already know about. While the monument may be changed at some point to better reflect the intentions, the space created around the park is here to stay. The community created in the center of busy commerce provides a break to the hustle and bustle of daily life. There are even many signs to try and limit the activity of the pigeons in the area, encouraging people not to feed them, even if it is ignored. This memorial has its pros and cons just like any other, but the community activity suggests that it is here to stay.

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