

# Feeding the World

Reviewed by Samuel Loewenberg

FAMINE IS ON THE DECLINE, even as less-severe food emergencies are more frequent. In *Famine: A Short History*, Cormac Ó Gráda explores why that is so. This far-ranging work of synthesis examines the course of famine throughout the last 5,000 years. Ó Gráda, an economics professor at University College Dublin who has published several books on the 19th-century Irish potato famine, argues against the common assumption that a famine is a simple case of more mouths to feed than food to fill them.

Though famine sometimes results from poverty or acts of nature, he writes, particularly in the last century human actions have been the primary factor—a conclusion that aligns with the findings of Nobel Prize-winning economist Amartya Sen. Historically, wars, dictators, and corruption usually have made famines worse, if they didn't cause them outright. Ó Gráda cites Hitler's blockade of Leningrad during World War II, the totalitarian regimes of Stalin and Mao that "greatly exacerbated" the food shortages in their countries, and the starvation that ravaged Tanzania after food stocks were grabbed first by the German and then the British empires.

If Ó Gráda's project sounds broad, it is. He appears to be trying to create an economic historiography of famine, concerned as much with showing how food crises were perceived and documented as with drawing conclusions about their causes from the evidence. His treatment of the Niger food crisis in 2005, in which three million people—many of them children—were at risk of severe malnutrition, highlights the complexity of modern famines even as it demonstrates the limitations of his approach. Ó Gráda writes that a week after vivid pictures of starving children ran on the BBC and then were picked up by other media outlets, an Irish nongovernmental organization chartered a plane to deliver food to Niger. "Today long-distance movements of food-

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stuffs during famines, by air and fast ships, are routine," he concludes.

But the value of fast new transportation is not the first lesson to draw from Niger's experience. The event was largely seen as a failure of the international community, which for months ignored warnings about the crisis. Further, food shipments generally aren't the best response to a hunger crisis. The United States is one of only a few countries in the world that still ship food, a practice that congressional analysts say wastes 50 percent of funds allocated to hunger relief and takes months, as compared with the far more efficient method of sending money to NGOs that purchase from local food supplies. But the Bush administration's efforts to reform this system over the last several years were stymied by members of Congress beholden to powerful American agricultural and shipping interests.

Ó Gráda's analysis is strongest when he discusses a case in depth. Looking at the food crisis in British-administered Bengal during World War II, which took two million lives, Ó Gráda delves into wartime correspondence between colonial administrators and the war chiefs in London. He concludes that the huge toll of the famine was avoidable. Contrary to the widely held belief that the food shortage was the result of hoarding, he blames it on the decision by British officials to focus food and transportation resources on the war effort. "The two million and more who perished in Bengal were mainly unwitting, colonial casualties of a struggle not of their making—that against fascism."

In his conclusion, Ó Gráda notes that increased food production, improved agricul-

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tural and medical technologies, and better governance (the despots Hitler, Mao, and Stalin “have left no important heirs”) have reduced the prevalence of wide-scale famines of the sort that were so devastating in the past. But chronic malnutrition is still widespread, a direct result of income inequalities in many societies between a small group of the very rich and a large mass of the very poor. It’s an issue Ó Gráda fails to seriously delve into. Sometimes, more focus and less scope can lead to richer findings.

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ARTS & LETTERS

## Changing Tunes

Reviewed by Grant Alden

INVENTORS RAN WILD DURING the years bracketing the turn of the 20th century, creating technology that repeatedly transformed the ways people heard and consumed music. It happened again a hundred years later, which makes David Suisman’s lucid account of the emergence and consolidation of the music industry particularly welcome.

Before the Industrial Revolution worked its magic, music was mostly an amateur (or at best semipro) affair, something one played and listened to in parlors, at dances and marches, in concert settings, and in vaudeville halls. Songs had been sold as sheet music throughout the 19th century, but the publishers—printers, really—were small, scattered businesses. That slowly changed, and by the 1890s sheet music publishers were competing fiercely for market share—for “hits”—paying song pluggers (the term survives) to sing and place songs with performers in every conceivable setting, from department stores to prisons. Thus began the process of injecting popular music into our daily lives, converting songs

into commodities that were “unapologetically commercial and distinctively American.”

Naturally, such investments had to be protected, but not until the landmark Copyright Act of 1909 did U.S. law recognize something as intangible as a song as property. Suisman, an assistant professor of history at the University of Delaware (and a DJ on freeform independent radio station WFMU in Jersey City), does a first-rate job of sketching the publishers’ role in drafting that legislation. But he does not entirely sympathize with the impulses behind the law, which he views as “fetishizing the composer and the composition” rather than the performance, and granting preferred status to composed music over interpreted forms, such as traditional folk or jazz.

He describes the boom and bust of the industry that developed around the player piano, the most successful mechanical playback device (many variations on the music box were experimented with) to emerge before and compete with the phonograph. And he details the emergence of the Victor Talking Machine Company, founded in 1901, which produced both 78 rpm discs (burying Thomas Edison’s recorded cylinders) and the majority of the devices that made it possible for ordinary people to hear, say, the superstar tenor Enrico Caruso. Finally, in a curious counterpoint to Victor’s story, he traces the rise and fall of the African-American-owned Black Swan label, which sought to prosper while serving as an instrument of social change and artistic expression.

These stories, all well and carefully told, expand upon Suisman’s 2003 prize-winning doctoral dissertation. As there are few documents to analyze and no survivors to interview, he was obliged to rely on trade journal puffery, the papers of key figures such as gramophone inventor Emile Berliner, and, when discussing publishing firms, the songwriting manuals of the time. Throughout *Selling Sounds* there wafts a faint odor of disapproval, as if Suisman wishes things had gone differently. “On the one hand,” he

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The Commercial Revolution in American Music.

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