The Journal of Ecocriticism
A New Journal of Nature, Society and Literature
JoE

The Frosty Winters of Ireland: Poems of Climate Crisis 1739-41

Lucy Collins (University College Dublin)[1]

Abstract

The period between 1450 and 1850 in Europe is often referred to as the 'Little Ice Age' but it was in the years 1739-1741 that Ireland experienced some of the most severe weather conditions ever recorded in the country. The Great Frost, as it later became known, caused unprecedented disturbance in Ireland's ecology: lakes and rivers were frozen, potato crops and grain harvests were ruined, and livestock and humans perished from hunger and disease. This devastation of the natural world was accompanied by upheaval in civic life, including the break-up of rural communities and an increase in crime and social unrest. Though the extraordinary weather witnessed at this time has largely been forgotten, it calls attention to the impact of climatic conditions on both human and non-human environments, as well as exploring the challenge these circumstances presented to existing human perceptions of the relationship between man and nature. Many of the poems written and published at the time explore this unprecedented experience, some drawing on the conventions of poetic representations of the natural world, others offering innovative expressions of diverse conditions. Using the work of well known figures such as William Dunkin and Laurence Whyte, as well as hitherto uncollected texts by lesser-known and anonymous writers, this essay will explore the poetic mediation of this important environmental event and consider its impact on our understanding of the natural world in Ireland in this period.

Climate change is the most far-reaching of ecological anxieties and the most significant problem for the twenty-first century and beyond, yet its literary representation presents considerable critical challenges. Though the weather is represented frequently throughout the history of written literature, it is rarely a particular theme or central concern of the work. Long deemed an innocuous conversational topic, talk of the weather often specifically expresses avoidance of more provocative political or social matters; it is a subject of universal interest that yet deserves only fleeting attention. Samuel Johnson's wry comment captures the pointless nature of this talk exactly: "It is commonly observed, that when two Englishmen meet, their first talk is of the weather; they are in haste to tell each other, what each must already know, that it is hot or cold, bright or cloudy, windy or calm" (n.p.). In keeping with its persistent yet disparaged conversational presence, the weather's representation in literature has been associated with human action

[1] Lucy Collins, (lucy.collins@ucd.ie) Lucy Collins is a Lecturer in English Literature in the School of English, Drama and Film at University College Dublin.

and mood; the sensory possibilities it offers emphasize localized particularity, rather than larger philosophical or ethical concerns. It may be the experiential dimension of weather that leads to its rather privatized representation: it appears in the more immediate forms of discourse—of letters, diaries and daily reports—but seldom is at the centre of significant and lasting representation.[1] Yet weather has shaped human history and perception in significant ways, and has the potential to draw the experiential and the conceptual, the private and the public, into complex alignment.

The Romantic era presents a dramatic change to the literary representation of weather. The heightened attention to interior states during this period was matched by an increased awareness of the relationship between human individuals and their wider environment. The representation of weather was capable of drawing shared experiences and private moods together, and later novelists would use its potential to the full: the Brontës, Joseph Conrad, Charles Dickens and George Eliot all invoked weather conditions to intensify the reader's understanding of emotional states and social conditions in their novels.[2] In poetry too, Romanticism proved an important turning point in climate representation; from Percy Bysshe Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind" to John Keats's "The Eve of St Agnes," natural forces could be made expressive of the political dynamics of the day. Yet Jonathan Bate has argued convincingly for the documentary significance of weather events in this work, as well as its metaphorical power.[3] This highlights the importance of weather as a subject for sustained representation in the poetry, not merely as a literary trope or an expression of human emotions and concerns. It marked a new understanding of the important reciprocal relationship between man and nature.

The desire to free natural images from the weight of classical allusions and to represent them directly would be among the most revolutionary aspects of Romantic poetry, but earlier poets also grappled with these aesthetic possibilities. Fluctuating weather was a feature of almost all eighteenth-century topographical poetry,[4] but for many of the most prominent poets, such as John Denham (1615-1669) and James Thomson (1700-1748), the weather was not felt but instead observed. This would change as the eighteenth century wore on, however, and labouring-class writers brought the experiential aspects of the natural world to poetic representation.[5] While all three poets under consideration in this essay are formally educated, they register the emotional power of extreme weather and the new aesthetic possibilities that changing literary tastes can bring.[6] The experience of extreme weather conditions, and their tragic human consequences, confronts these poets with the challenge to represent the facts directly, while tradition compels them not to abandon the status of familiar poetic modes. This creative tension, which can be traced throughout the texts explored here, mirrors the larger ethical challenge of representing traumatic events in verse.

The process of dwelling on the earth means that humans must attempt to understand their environment in the fullest sense—not just the ground under their feet but the air above them. This is a relational understanding that exists not on one plane only, but in three-dimensional space, and as such, offers challenges to the reach and attentiveness of the human mind. Though we draw sustenance from the earth, the air above shapes our relationship with it; it is through this element that we move, and by it that we live—drawing from it the oxygen we need to survive. Tim Ingold pursues this idea further: he argues that "a living, breathing body is at once a body-on-the-ground and a body-in-the-air. Earth and sky, then, are not components of an external environment... [t]hey are rather regions of the body's very existence, without which no knowing or remembering would be possible at all" (Ingold: 122). This internalization of weather, and its impact on our intellectual and emotional functions, specifically calls into question assumptions concerning weather's peripheral importance in our lives and in our cultural representations. Climate has a crucial impact on our temperament; yet weather's natural volatility expresses the idea of change and may be the cause of its marginalization within the discourses of cultural exploration:

> Everything that exists and that might form the object of our perception is placed upon this surface [of the earth], rather as properties and scenery might be set upon the stage of a theatre. Beneath the surface lies the domain of formless matter, the physical stuff of the

> world. And above it lies the domain of immaterial form, of pure ideas or concepts (Ingold 3).

Ingold himself calls air "an unthinkable medium" and it is this challenge to thought and representation that I want to explore in this essay. Air is partly unthinkable, I will argue, because of the challenges it presents to human perception and representation: the figure in the landscape is constrained by the limits of human sight and, though the creative artist fuses observation and imagination, his work will be expressive of both these experiential constraints and the intellectual limitations of the day. The weather exceeds the power of the human to control and order his existence, and remains among the phenomena least subject to developments in scientific thinking. Climate conditions can destroy individual human lives and histories, indeed all the marks we leave upon the earth. This situation makes artistic traces tentative and provisional, and all attempts to represent climate conditions fraught with difficulty—as Richard Mabey writes: "the weather, in our culture and our psychology, is intricately linked with time, and especially with time's familiars, memory and expectation" (Mabey 15). Weather reveals the world to be always in formation, so in returning to a period on the cusp of scientific discovery, I will explore the fault-lines between superstitious belief and rational observation, between intellectual and emotional response, acknowledging the complexity of thinking and writing on the relationship between weather and the human community.

The climate of the British Isles during the eighteenth century was not dissimilar to today's climate, though colder winters meant average temperatures were perhaps a degree lower than they are now (McWilliams 116). In spite of an acknowledged obsession with the vagaries of the weather, Ireland had a climate conducive to strong agricultural production with relatively high rainfall and comparatively little variation in temperature. Though possessing these elements of stability, the weather ultimately failed to yield to any reliable investigation of its processes, a feature that provoked considerable scrutiny and debate. During this period, responses to the weather can be loosely divided into two kinds: the first a superstitious belief in the wonders and horrors of nature; the second an understanding of the weather as a manifestation of divine pleasure or retribution, as in the comment by this anonymous author: "when Natural Agents act in a strange, unusual manner… this is from the Lord" (Golinski 20). Some natural philosophers who recommended careful observation as a prelude to better understanding of the weather felt that such observations did not preclude the reiteration of long-held folk beliefs; others, such as Robert Boyle, were in favour of the separation of scientific and popular meteorologies, "[i]t being much more commendable for a man to preserve the history of his own time. . . than to say 'this is the hottest, or this is the coldest'" (Boyle 642). Accordingly, the weather was no longer regarded as being made up of discrete and incomprehensible events, but was instead seen as a continuous process, a web of meanings; it was this understanding that would shape the earliest developments of meteorological science. Naturalists such as Gilbert White were hopeful that their activities would relegate superstitious thought in favour of reason: these records were judged to have an intellectual respectability very different from their folk counterpart, but were not aloof from providential effects. The process of gathering observations was designed to uncover the laws of nature, which were not distinct from God's agency but rather evidence of both his forethought and miraculous actions. Irishman John Rutty was particularly critical of those who saw the weather as random or without discernable pattern. According to him "divine Wisdom and Goodness" could be detected even in seemingly irregular events (II: 280-1).[7] In theological terms it marked a shift in emphasis away from interpretation of the sacred text and towards reason as a pivotal determinant in matters of theodicy (Jankovic 57). Yet the ways in which the weather was understood were closely entwined with the politics of the day. Between the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century religion lay at the heart of British politics and the representation of the Great Storm of 1703 demonstrated just how significantly the interpretation of natural events was shaped by these larger preoccupations. The storm—which caused the death of up to 9000 people and enormous destruction of property—was judged by Queen Anne to be "a token of divine displeasure" (Jankovic 61). Yet even those who acknowledged a providential basis for the crisis, showed interest in the more rational approaches of the early natural philosophers: most famously, author Daniel Defoe advertised for accounts of the storm, a decision that reflected the ideological tensions of the time (Jankovic 62-3). This impulse towards gathering individual descriptions of natural events was

significant in its emphasis on the experiential aspect of the weather and its endorsement of the value of personal testimony in the form of precise observation.

The process of record keeping shaped how the weather was perceived in a number of ways. As well as emphasizing cyclical patterns, it stressed the importance of instruments for reading the weather accurately, and of long-term strategies for recording and framing these findings. In this way it suggested that instead of seeing weather as an unpredictable phenomenon, its potential for continuity and regularity should be acknowledged (Reed 8). Weather narratives thus became part of a larger scholarly endeavour, many of them being generated by provincial gentry and clergymen who already had strong antiquarian interests (Golinski 78). Affinity with place offered legitimacy to these investigations; they proceeded on a firm regional basis, seeking to differentiate between places rather than to affirm similarities. The aim of Robert Plot's *Natural Histories*, for example, was to compile a register of each county's curiosities, thus positioning the local as a crucial part of any larger analysis (Jankovic 86). This kind of focus saw a widening gap between material generated in the countryside and the more remote speculations of a metropolitan sensibility. The immediacy of local observation also emphasized the seasonal dimension of many of the findings—a feature to which the Irish meteorologist, Richard Kirwan, was especially attentive (Jankovic 131). Even when this was the case, the vagaries of climate might be seen as incomprehensible to the observer, as a manifestation not only of the whimsical powers of fate, but of perceptible change that marked the smallness of human understanding. As Jonathan Bate argues, "[t]he weather is the primary sign of the inextricability of culture and nature" (437) and all its representations speak of social and intellectual contexts as well as natural ones. For those poets bearing witness to the extraordinary spectacle of Ireland's Great Frost, feelings of wonder and awe competed with the need to bear witness to the trauma of ensuring events and to give them shape and meaning for readers.

In poems written throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in Ireland, the impact of weather on human experience can easily be traced. The temperate character of the climate in this archipelago made both islands less susceptible to crises brought on by climatic events yet, in spite of this fact, there were moments in Ireland's history when extreme weather conditions prevailed, and with them came significant acts of witness and records of human trauma. The approaches to representing this natural disaster are in themselves interesting: letters and political pamphlets appeared addressing the ensuing hardship, but other forms of representation were notably scarce, especially visual representations both of the freezing conditions and their social repercussions. Artists resisted depicting distress and shame, in favour of forms of engagement that aimed to prompt reflection and positive action: the extremities of experience, it seems, were most often turned to practical account. There are poems, both in Irish and English, that explore this unprecedented experience in memorable ways, however, some drawing on the conventions of poetic representations of the natural world, others offering innovative expressions of diverse conditions. Primarily, these are poems of witness, concerned with the important responsibility of engaging with the extremity of nature and contemplating man's complex relationship with his environment.

Human hardship is inextricably linked to challenging weather conditions and it was in the years 1739-1741 that Ireland experienced some of the most severe weather conditions ever recorded in the country. The Great Frost, as it later became known, caused unprecedented disturbance in Ireland's ecology: lakes and rivers were frozen, potato crops and grain harvests ruined, and livestock and humans perished from hunger and disease. This devastation of the natural world was accompanied by upheaval in civic life, including the break-up of rural communities and an increase in crime and social unrest. It was a combination of circumstances that would, to a large extent, be repeated in the Great Famine of 1845-9, though the longer duration of this disaster—and its particular demographic implications—would have more enduring social and political effects. The disease that caused the widespread destruction of the potato crop was born of certain climate conditions, but its effects were more closely linked to the political circumstances governing a great many of those in Ireland who were dependent on the smallholding for their livelihoods. The Great Famine remains Ireland's most enduring cultural trauma. By contrast, the extraordinary climatic conditions that prevailed in Ireland for eighteenth months from the end of 1739, and documented in David Dickson's book *Arctic Ireland* (1997), have largely been forgotten, yet these events call apt attention to the impact of

extreme weather on both human and non-human environments, as well to the challenge these circumstances presented to existing human perceptions of the relationship between man and nature.[8]

As in so many periods of complex political structures, the devastating effect of the Great Frost in Ireland was shaped in no small measure by the social factors exerting influence on Irish society of the time. Poverty was endemic in Ireland with the control of its resources in the hands of a small minority; few of the country's major exports—including wool products, butter and salted beef—were ones that benefitted the smallholder directly (Dickson, 'Famine' 22-3). Ireland's uneven development economically would also accentuate the hardship experienced in some areas of the country, especially in Munster and large parts of Connaught, to the extent that John Post argues that a deficient social infrastructure, and the resulting over-reliance on public intervention in terms of crisis, would greatly affect the mortality rates for this disaster (300). Philanthropy relied on the parish as the unit for monitoring and alleviating hardship; in the cities urban councils also had a role to play in this process. Early in the crisis, though, support of those in need lacked organizational rigour and it was this factor, as much as the recurring natural disasters, that prolonged the hardship of so many communities.[9] The initial response of many to the freezing temperatures was one of wonder and euphoria, but this was quickly dispelled as the true human cost began to be revealed. The loss of the potato crop was the first indicator of a forthcoming crisis in food supply, which peaked in the summer of 1740 after a long period of drought (Dickson, "Famine" 24). It was in late Spring of this year that the first food riots occurred, reflecting anger at continuing exportation of grain from areas of serious hardship (Dickson, *Atlas* 27). With the onset, as early as October 1740, of another winter of startlingly low temperatures, it became clear that the crisis would be prolonged. The medical effects of malnutrition and homelessness began to be felt in earnest at this time and members of the middle and upper classes fell victim to diseases carried by the wandering poor (Dickson, "Famine" 27). Both the scale and the longevity of the crisis were extraordinary, and just as they confounded attempts to bring both social and medical problems under control, so they created representational challenges for those who wished to address these experiences in verse. The most significant texts to engage with the events explicitly invoke aesthetic dilemmas, as well as revealing the artistic reach needed to confront such a complex set of circumstances.

In his own career William Dunkin (c.1709-1765) exemplifies this complexity, writing "The Frosty Winters of Ireland" (1742) first in Latin and then in English. Dunkin, described by Jonathan Swift as "a Gentleman of much Wit, and the best English as well as Latin poet in this Kingdom" (Swift V, 86) was educated at Trinity College Dublin, and the author of a range of original and witty verse. Though as a younger man he had collaborated in the production of scurrilous verse satires, this poem, of close to 130 lines, is a sombre production. It represents the bitter extremity of this natural disaster, couching it initially in supernatural terms: instead of the "Heaven" of fair weather and "fields/A-float with golden grain" comes from Hell the vengeful cold, severe enough to destroy all forms of life. The reason for this devastation is debated in an elegantly wrought but syntactically complex set of digressions—"(whether through the stroke/Of chance, or fate or vengeful Heaven, (how due/To crimes repeated…))"—that unsurprisingly lead to no clear resolution. The extent to which these events exceed human understanding, even human imagining, is an important shaping force on this lengthy meditation, as though attentive description itself could help to make sense of these events for poet and reader. In this respect we may situate the poem on the cusp between wonder and reason, where the extraordinary spectacle of the frozen landscape is given free rein, even as the poet speculates as to its cause. If much of the wonder was removed from the observation of the natural world by the new science, there remained discrepancies between the waning appreciation of the marvelous, and the evidential outcomes of scientific investigation (Daston and Park 329-330). This temporal gap is even more pronounced in the Irish context, where scientific thinking took longer to become firmly established. It is fitting, then, that this poem oscillates between a desire to document with exactness, and a willingness to indulge in speculation as to the cause of this astonishing event—a speculation in which religious belief maintains a strong presence. As though in support of this tension, the poem interweaves a range of different metaphorical patterns throughout its dense texture. Imagery of disease gives way to that of war: precipitation is akin to enemy fire, but with greater range and consequence. Next the shock

experienced by the "frighted globe" is linked to the terrible fact of original sin itself. The fate of the entire earth, it seems, is decided by these inexplicable events.

The female figure as bearer of tragedy includes the "baneful fury" of the opening stanza and now Eve, through whom sin entered the world. Some of the most memorable description in this poem is of a purely sensory kind, as the poet bears witness to the stilling of natural energy, the power sufficient to arrest rivers mid-flow: "Beneath the glassy gulph/Fishes benumb'd, and lazy sea-calves freeze/In crystal coalition with the deep" (ll. 30-32). The beauty of this description does not lessen the horror for the human observer, but it does reinforce the interdependence of all living things. Without explicitly naming it, Dunkin explores here the notion of the ecosystem, within which a sudden imbalance can have stark consequences. Yet he also recounts with accuracy the sequence of disasters with which communities were confronted, even in the first six months of the crisis: first the frozen rivers, then the food shortages, later the death of horses and cattle due to depleted stocks of fodder (Dickson, *Arctic* 11-22). "The Frosty Winters of Ireland" enacts the importance of both spatial and temporal interconnection as it describes the different life forms affected by the freezing conditions, beginning with water—the first element to suffer radically from the change in temperature—then moving to the earth. Winter's "frigid womb" brings forth not life, but the deathliness of unproductive seed; even brambles and briars decay. Vertumnus, the Roman god of the seasons, of change and of plant growth is confounded by the destruction of trees, flowering shrubs and fruit. The age-old understanding of natural process is changed irrevocably, and with it the larger philosophical approaches to the passage of time. The deathliness of this extreme cold expresses a universe resistant to man's attempts at order, and runs counter to the implementation of early scientific thinking. This is a poem of awe and horror, rather than understanding and mastery, and its lengthy sentences with their complex clauses show language at full stretch to accommodate the act of appalling witness.

After the death of growing things, comes that of birds, a feature recorded by others at the time, including this anonymous poet in *Faulkner's Dublin Journal*—"No lark is left to wake the morn,/Or rouse the youth with early horn;/The blackbird's melody is o'er" (Dickson, *Arctic* 22). Dunkin's treatment of this makes use of the poetic potential of the bird to suggest transcendence:

> Those, upward-soaring, leave
>
> Their frozen lives beneath the stars: but these
>
> With eager eyes devour the luring bait,
>
> That shines beneath the icy mirror barr'd,
>
> And mocks with pure deceit their empty beaks (ll. 65-9)

The loss of their beautiful song from the woodland reinforces the aesthetic response to these conditions. This music is replaced with "loud-rending storms" that bring down trees and wreck ships at sea. The waves become "fluid mountains" and the stiffening brine and continuous snow turns land and sea into "one vast, hoar, interminable waste". Both in terms of space and time, this freezing state is never-ending, since the differentiation possible during clement weather is at an end. It is a condition that confounds scientific attentiveness to seasonal change and rejects with it the easy sense of hope that cyclical duration can suggest. The poem comes full circle; the swain who appeared at its opening dies, as his wife and child sit in freezing silence: the woman "[s]ooths with her hand, close pressing to her breast/The tender pledge of love, her infant babe;/When stupid, motionless, as figur'd stone,/She stares: the faultring accents, on her tongue/Stiff, into silence everlasting freeze" (ll. 125-129). This final tableau evokes the powerlessness of man against these elements, and the silencing of human reason and explanation in the face of such terrible

power. It combines the emotional impact of the crafted line—the sibilance of "sooths…pressing… breast…" fading into "…silence" —with the resonance of eyewitness statement.[10] That the poem itself should move towards silence after its attentive act of witness represents a significant act of creative yielding in the face of the unknown.

The crisis of representation that William Dunkin faces here is addressed in a very different way by Thomas Hallie Delamayne (1718-1773) in his poem "To Francis Bindon Esq". Like Dunkin, Delamayne was educated at Trinity College; he worked for some years as a barrister in Dublin, before moving to London. This text was inspired by the portrait Bindon had painted of Hugh Boulter, archbishop of Armagh, a work that depicted him dispensing charity to the needy.[11] In addressing an artist, and instructing him on what to include in his painting ("O'er the froz'd North, I'd stretch a sheet of snow"), Delamayne draws attention both to the power and responsibility of representation, and claims the space of the poem as one in which detailed events, and comments on their political and social circumstances, can find expression. His solution emphasizes the extremity of the conditions through sound and visual image—full rhyme in couplets together with assonance and alliteration highlight through opposition the existential emptiness of the following lines: "No native green should chear, no berry blow;/Depending clouds and fogs condens'd should lie/O'er the white surface, and obscure the sky." The starkness of the scene is suggestive too of the impossibility of interpretation, of the blank canvas and whiteness of the unprinted page. This crisis of experience, which is also one of representation, obliquely addresses the trauma of these years, not only for the subjects who bore the greatest suffering, but also for those struggling to represent these events. The sensory attentiveness of Delamayne's description confirms the power of language to probe the crisis, as he goes on to depict the frozen loughs as capable of bearing the weight of wagons that signal attempts to continue the practices of trade in this impossible situation. The contained couplet offers a resonant means to evoke the hopeless immobility of the populace and its future impact on economic and social conditions: "The fountain-springs now stop'd, which us'd to fill/The current veins, the wheel of life stands still."

Amidst the precision of this verbal depiction, there is room too for feeling; metaphors of deathly stillness are more than poetic devices—they become direct representations of the finality of death itself:

> Lost in a sleeting mist, the Trav'ler's sense,
>
> Mock'd of his way, should stand in dead suspence;
>
> Bent to the whirlwind's drift, the Hors'd-man fast
>
> So-journey on, life's stage already past.
>
> The woolly Flock plunge in the treach'rous snow;
>
> The bellowing Ox for food his pastures blow;
>
> And Man, athirst, scarce lift the ax to cleave
>
> A moist subsistence from the hardened wave.
>
> Or force with prongs of steel the marbled ground,
>
> In search of roots, and ev'n those roots unsound. (ll. 31-40)

Seamlessly, the poem moves towards famine—the inevitable outcome of this crisis of hardship. Both Dunkin and Delamayne personify Famine and Disease to dramatize their gradual and shocking effects on the populace, culminating in the image of the starving infant, for whom the milk of the sick mother becomes a kind of poison. The greater social implications of the epidemic begin to be felt in the poems as crowds of beggars die and must remain unburied because the ground is frozen too hard to admit their coffins. These images are suggestive of fundamental social breakdown as those who previously took responsibility for the poor are now themselves reduced by circumstance. It is a situation lamented in an Irish poem from the time by Seán Ó Conaire: "My great sorrow is that the nobles of the Gael/Are now in great distress,/Because all their means of livelihood/Have been destroyed by the frost" (McKay 43).[12] The trauma in Delamayne's poem is shaped not only by the severity of experience but of the failure of social structures to compensate for such experience. Depicting the burning down of Richard Wellesley's Dangan Castle, due to the fact there was no water to quench the flames, the poet again uses verifiable facts with a strong metaphorical power for the reader: where even the greatest citizens are defeated by nature there can be little hope of order and prosperity.

In ironic juxtaposition, Delamayne follows a depiction of boats marooned in a frozen sea with an account of the floods that overwhelmed parts of Ireland in December 1740. Water inundates the poem—the word 'flood' itself appearing in three consecutive lines—while animals are drowned and property further damaged by these conditions. Though the relationship between lengthy frost and the waters caused by a sudden thaw are explicable, the impression of unending crisis is hard to dispel either from the poem or from commentators at the time. Laurence Whyte (c.1683-c.1753), a prolific poet of the early 18th century, was concerned with the effects that the drastic economic changes of the time had on ordinary people. Two of his poems mark an important intervention in the debates during the early 1740s about the effects of Ireland's Great Frost— "Famine" and "Plenty" — "a poem on the sudden fall of Corn in Dublin, July 1741; by the vast importation of all kinds of Foreign Grain, and the great Prospect of a plentiful Harvest".

"Famine: A Poem" is "inscrib'd to the Right Hon. Samuel Cook" who was Lord Mayor of Dublin between 1740 and 1741. Like a number of pamphlets and poems of the time it addresses the scarcity of bread, and the political implications of this, during the years immediately following the Great Frost. The poem begins daringly, by addressing the question of poetic intervention itself: in contrast to the visual emphasis of Delamayne's poem, here it is the rhetorical accomplishment that first strikes the reader:

How many bards of old have wrote for Bread?

When pinch'd with Hunger, what fine Things they said?

Whether they wrote in Parlour, or in Garret,

Or quench'd their Thirst with Water, Ale or Claret,

Or by their Stars left for themselves to shift,

They were sometimes caress'd like POPE, or SWIFT.

How comes it now, that in this Year of Want,

When Famine reigns, and Bread so very scant,

That Wit, and Humour rather sink than rise,

And seem to tally with the Baker's Size. (ll. 1-10)

This reduction in the size of the loaf was a common preoccupation at the time, but it is a trope pursued by Whyte throughout the poem: the smaller loaf, the watered-down beer, all indicate how commerce attempts to revive itself by punishing for a second time the very sector of society most depleted by famine and disease. Yet is also suggestive of a mode of discourse limited in its powers of affect—one that cannot 'rise' to the occasion. Adulterated alcohol lacks the capacity to lift the mood of the drinker; here it becomes not only a feature of difficult economic circumstances, but evidence of a demoralised people: "No Joke, or Fun, no Song or merry Tale,/Goes down as usual, over *Irish Ale*;/While Shoals of Beggars crou'd at ev'ry Door,/Who cou'd some Months before relieve the Poor". Again the role of writing in social commentary is contemplated, and those poets who have engaged in such debates directly named: Jonathan Swift, William Dunkin and James Sterling.

For Whyte, it is the social and economic effects of the Great Frost that are the chief focus of the poem; only later does he turn to a description of the weather itself. In this he reiterates some of the main observations of other poets—the rarity of this extreme weather, the frozen rivers and lakes – but he couches this frigidity in classical terms:

The Earth lock'd up her Treasures under Ground,

And Dearth began to spread itself around:

The Horn of Plenty flew up from the Earth,

And left behind it Poverty and Dearth,

With Evils equal to Pandora's Box,

Contagion, Famine, Death, and deadly Shocks. (ll. 49-54)

Yet Whyte's concern—both here and in his poem 'Plenty' from the same year—remains with the politics of surfeit and need. In ironic mode 'Plenty' uses similar imagery to its companion poem: "The Earth drives up her Crops of Grass and Grain,/Bles'd with alternate Sun-Shine, and with Rain", going on to use Biblical, rather than Classical, references to ground his argument more securely in a framework of moral judgment.

These poems of pronounced political engagement affirm the importance of the weather to the present and future of all human beings, regardless of nationality or station. In the Irish context, where agriculture has played such a role in both the economy and social development of the country, climate is an especially pivotal dimension. As an island nation Ireland's weather is subject to continuous fluctuation, though rarely to climate crisis, yet it has also played a role in the country's experience of war, of conquest and of civil unrest. Constantly changing weather is a marker of vulnerability that the passage to modernity cannot quite overcome. Centuries after these powerful poems were written, the close connections between the weather and human behaviour continue to challenge and engage us.

Endnotes

1. The most famous of such records is Gilbert White's *Natural History and Antiquities of Selbourne*, first published in 1789. For discussion of an earlier weather diary, from the year 1703, see Jan Golinski, "'Exquisite Atmography: Theories of the World and Experiences of the Weather in a Diary of 1703", *The British Journal for the History of*

Science, 34.2 (June 2001): 149-171. John Rutty's summary of the weather from 1716 to 1766 is the most significant Irish record.

2. The differing contexts of these works are significant in shaping the representation of weather: the opening pages of *Bleak House* exemplify Dickens's use of weather as a means to connect particular experiences with larger human states, while Conrad's maritime fiction highlights the variability of the weather as a key determinant of narrative development. See also Anny Sadrin, "Time, Tense, Weather in Three 'Flood Novels': *Bleak House*, *The Mill on the Floss*, *To the Lighthouse*" *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 30 (2000): 96-105.

3. See Jonathan Bate, "Living with the Weather." *Studies in Romanticism*. Vol. 35 (Fall 1996): 431-447. Visual artists in the Romantic Period also engaged in the representation of the real—what Constable called "the natural history...of the skies". See Gillen D'Arcy Wood, "Constable, Clouds, Climate Change" *The Wordsworth Circle* 38.1-2 (2007): 25-34.

4. *The Gentleman's Magazine* was founded in London in 1731 and ran uninterrupted for almost 200 years. The introduction to its database of poems notes the following: "One has only to notice the frequency and predictable recurrence of poignant seasonal verses to realize how powerful and intimate was the influence of weather on the *GM*'s contributors, especially those who lived in country villages, where they were at the mercy of snow and sleet, rain and cold." See www.gmpoetrydatabase.org.

5. Bridget Keegan, in her essay "Snowstorms, Shipwrecks, and Scorching Heat: The Climates of Eighteenth-Century Laboring-Class Locodescriptive Poetry" argues that for English poets such as John Clare, Mary Collier, Stephen Duck and Mary Leapor the weather was felt, rather than observed, highlighting human vulnerability in nature.

6. The poems included here, together with the biographical details of their authors, are printed in full in Andrew Carpenter and Lucy Collins eds, *The Irish Poet and the Natural World: An Anthology of Verse in English from the Tudors to the Romantics*, due for publication by Cork University Press in 2014.

7. John Rutty (1697–1775) was a physician and naturalist who spent most of his adult life serving the poor. A Dublin Quaker, he was the author of numerous texts including *A Methodical Synopsis of the Mineral Waters of Ireland* (1757) and *An Essay towards the Natural History of the County of Dublin* (1772).

8. I am indebted to the work of David Dickson both for its delineation of the various stages of this crisis, and for its exemplary engagement with a range of literary resources.

9. James Kelly's recent article, "Coping with Crisis: The Response to the Famine of 1740-41" explores the organizational basis for dealing with this disaster.

10. The observations made here are similar to those published in pamphlet form in 1741: "I have seen the aged father eating grass like a beast… the hungry infant sucking at the breast of the already expired parent". "Publicola." *A letter from a country gentleman in the province of Munster to His Grace the Lord Primate of All Ireland*, quoted in Drake (103-4).

11. Hugh Boulter (1672-1742) was the most prominent churchman to become involved in famine relief during this period. Born in London, he was controversially offered the primacy of the Church of Ireland in 1724.

12. Cormac Ó Gráda and Diarmaid Ó Muirithe have noted the scarcity of texts in Irish relating to this event, even though this was the language of most of the victims. They published five Irish language poems on the famine of 1740-41, together with translations and commentary, in *Eire-Ireland* 45.3/4 (Fall/Winter 2010): 1-22.

Works Cited

Bate, Jonathan. "Living with the Weather." *Studies in Romanticism*. Vol. 35 (Fall 1996): 431-447. Print.

Boyle, Robert. "A General History of the Air." *The Works of Robert Boyle*. Vol. 12. 642. Print.

D'Arcy Wood, Gillen. "Constable, Clouds, Climate Change" *The Wordsworth Circle* 38.1-2 (2007): 25-34.

Daston, Lorraine and Katharine Park. *Wonders and the Order of Nature 1150-1750*. New York: Zone Books, 2001. Print.

Delamayne, Thomas Hallie. *To Francis Bindon Esq., on a picture of His Grace Dr Hugh Boulter, Lord Arch-Bishop of Armagh, set up in the Work-house, near Dublin, in Commemoration of his Charities in the Years 1739-40 and 1740-41.* London, 1747. Print.

Dickson, David. *Arctic Ireland*. Belfast: White Row Press, 1997. Print.

--- . "1740-41 Famine." *The Atlas of the Great Irish Famine*. Cork: Cork University Press, 2012. 23-27. Print.

Drake, Michael. "The Irish Demographic Crisis of 1740-41." *Historical Studies* 6 (1968). Print.

Dunkin, William. "The Frosty Winters of Ireland in the years 1739/40." *Select Poetical Works*. 2 vols. Dublin, 1769-70. Print.

Golinski, Jan. "'Exquisite Atmography: Theories of the World and Experiences of the Weather in a Diary of 1703", *The British Journal for the History of Science*, 34.2 (June 2001): 149-171.

---. "Time, Talk, and the Weather in Eighteenth-Century Britain." *Weather, Climate, Culture*. Eds Sarah Strauss and Benjamin S. Orlove. Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2003. 17-38. Print.

Ingold, Tim. "Footprints through the weather-world: walking, breathing, knowing." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* (2010): 121-139. Web. 21 Sept. 2012.

Jankovic, Vladimir. *Reading the Skies: A Cultural History of English Weather 1650-1820*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001. Print.

Johnson, Samuel. "Discourses on the Weather." *The Idler*. No. 11 (June 24, 1758). Web 12 Oct. 2012.

Keegan, Bridget. "Snowstorms, Shipwrecks, and Scorching Heat: The Climates of Eighteenth-Century Laboring-Class Locodescriptive Poetry." *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, 10.1 (Winter 2003): 75-96.

Kelly, James. "Coping with Crisis: The Response to the Famine of 1740-41" *Eighteenth-Century Ireland*, 27 (2012): 99-122. Print.

Mabey, Richard. *Turned Out Nice Again: Living with the Weather*. London: Profile Books, 2013.

McWilliams, Brendan. "The Kingdom of the Air: The Progress of Meteorology." *Nature in Ireland: A Scientific and Cultural History*. Ed. John Wilson Foster. Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 1997. 115-132. Print.

Ó Conaire, Seán. "A Lament for the Potatoes in the Year of the Big Frost 1739." *An Anthology of the Potato*. Ed Robert McKay. Trans. Nessa Doran. Dublin: Allen Figgis, 1961. Print.

Ó Gráda, Cormac and Diarmaid Ó Muirithe. "The Famine of 1740-41: Representations in Gaelic Poetry", *Eire-Ireland* 45.3/4 (Fall/Winter 2010): 1-22. Print.

Post, John. "Food Shortage, Climatic Variability and Epidemic Disease in Pre-Industrial Europe: The Mortality Peak in the Early 1740s." *Weather* 41.9 (September 1986): 299-300. Print.

Reed, Arden. *Romantic Weather: The Climates of Coleridge and Baudelaire*. Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1983. Print.

Rutty, John. *An Essay towards the Natural History of the County of Dublin*. 2 vols. Dublin: W. Sleator, 1772.

Sadrin, Anny. "Time, Tense, Weather in Three 'Flood Novels': *Bleak House*, *The Mill on the Floss*, *To the Lighthouse*" *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 30 (2000): 96-105.

Swift, Jonathan. *Correspondence.* Ed. Harold Williams. 5 vols. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963-65. Print.

Whyte, Laurence. "Famine: A Poem." *Original Poems of Various Subjects, Serious, Moral, and Diverting*. Dublin, 1742. 6-9.