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# POEM

Anne Casey

*University of Technology Sydney*  
ORCID: 0000-0002-6146-2722

## OTHERING, A CENTO

Anne Casey

*'a machine of wise and deliberate contrivance as well fitted for the oppression, impoverishment, and degradation of a people, and the debasement in them of human nature itself, as ever proceeded from the perverted ingenuity of man.'*

—Irish Statesman, Edmund Burke in a letter to Sir Hercules Langrishe in 1792, describing the Penal Laws introduced by the British government to control the native Irish population during colonisation.

### *i. Inception*

Our great difficulty  
is to maintain our principle  
without starving some  
of the perverse creatures—

women and little children  
scattered over the turnip fields  
like a flock of famishing crows,

devouring the raw turnips,  
mothers half naked, shivering  
in the snow and sleet, children  
screaming with hunger.

### *ii. A matter of commerce*

The cry of distress has rapidly  
increased, no reasonable doubt  
it is a cry of real distress;

I still labour for reserving  
our supplies. All are surprised  
to find the Government provision  
of food is so limited.

Right or wrong, the Government  
has committed—I am almost inclined  
to believe the Government  
would have acted more prudently

in abstaining from any direct  
interference in regard to food:

supply is inadequate to the probable  
extraordinary demand—

there still exists a great quantity of food  
of various kinds in the country  
and I am quite satisfied,  
as the customary market for it

is elsewhere, there can be no certainty  
of its remaining here  
for consumption.

*iii. Live exports to Sydney*

One hundred and seven days  
on her passage from Plymouth,  
she has on board two hundred  
and fifty-six immigrants—

namely, twenty-two married couples  
and two hundred and thirty-four  
Irish orphan girls; two deaths only  
occurred on the voyage.

On board the emigration vessels,  
fatherless, seduced,  
one wretched creature died  
soon after landing,

having been slung up by the waist  
to the rigging when far gone  
in pregnancy—  
by way of punishment.

*iv. Bill of lading*

Forty thousand pounds worth  
of this commodity imported  
and maintained at the public expense—

such degraded beings—  
brings a melancholy increase  
to the vice and lewdness  
now rampant in every part of town.

We have received  
no good servants  
for the wealthier classes,

no efficient farm servants,  
no virtuous and industrious  
young women, fit wives for the labouring.

Three hundred Irish orphan girls  
unhired—many doubtless preferred food  
and lodging as the hackney coach-horse

prefers his stand  
and nose-bag to hard work  
and whip-cord.

*v. Legacy*

If the children  
of all the drunkards in Sydney  
were to be brought up,  
the Government would soon  
require more extensive accommodations.

So painful a spectacle, so deplorable:  
idle and disorderly,  
in a shocking state of filth,  
charged with living  
and wandering

living and wandering  
living and wandering  
living and wandering  
living and wandering

living  
and wandering  
in company  
with their mother—

an idle and disorderly,  
a vagrant  
and reputed prostitute.

*vi. Resolution*

It shall be lawful  
for the superintendent  
of any Public Industrial School  
to punish any child

above the age of ten years  
who may leave the school  
without permission

by placing such child  
in close confinement  
for a period not exceeding  
fourteen days.

*vii. Rod*

Young as this child is—  
a frightful state of disease  
prevalent amongst her sex  
and class of older years  
in large towns—

a felony punished  
by putting eight (8)  
slaps of a cane  
on the hands

for getting in  
through the iron bars  
of the store windows  
and stealing:

too young  
to be placed  
in solitary confinement.

*viii. Judgment*

He struck her and gave her  
a black eye, but appeared  
to have received provocation.

*ix. Quieting*

Incarnate devils—  
one of these girls  
spoke freely of her past life:

sixteen months in Goulburn Gaol,  
eleven in solitary—  
a very small room  
with very small grating

near the ceiling;  
it was boarded,  
no furniture of any kind.

Next: three months  
in Darlinghurst Gaol—  
stone floors, no furniture,  
except a stool.

Another month in Goulburn Gaol—  
one of the four illused girls.  
The same girl again  
attempted to abscond

by leaping from the window,  
but hurt herself so severely  
that, from necessity,  
she has been quiet since.

### Note

This cento is derived from archived historical documents (including correspondence, newspaper reports and legislation) relating to British colonial rule in Ireland; the exportation of 4,000 Irish orphan girls aged 15 to 19 years to the Australian colony during the Great Irish Famine, intended as domestic servants and ‘breeding stock’; and the removal and incarceration of daughters of Irish famine refugees in Australia, resulting in intergenerational destitution, abuse and incarceration. This work has been produced with support of an Australian Government Research Training Scheme Scholarship as part of a doctorate examining the experiences of Irish famine refugees to Australia.

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### About the author

Originally from the west of Ireland and living in Sydney, Anne Casey is author of five poetry collections. A journalist and legal author for 30 years, her work is widely published internationally, ranking in *The Irish Times*’ Most Read. Anne has won literary awards in Ireland, Australia, the UK, Canada, Hong Kong, India and the USA, most recently American Writers Review 2021 and the Henry Lawson Prize 2022. She is the recipient of an Australian Government scholarship and a bursary for her PhD in Creative Writing at the University of Technology Sydney where she researches and teaches.

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