

STREET LEVEL PHOTOWORKS

FRANK McELHINNEY - FLIGHT

20TH AUGUST - 30TH OCTOBER 2022

Flight is a new solo exhibition by artist **Frank McElhinney** that reflects upon the long history of migration between Ireland and Scotland, with a particular focus on the effects of the Great Famine during the mid-nineteenth century. His work investigates contemporary issues through a historical lens. Recent wars in Ukraine, Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan have forced millions of people to flee their homelands. The worsening climate crisis almost guarantees other major population shifts in the near future. Throughout his practice and long-term projects, McElhinney addresses issues around conflict, migration and nationhood. This work poses the question of considering our own history so that we can better understand the response required to meet the contemporary challenges of mass migration. Whilst he works with different mediums, photography is foremost in his practice - his photographs are made outdoors, using a wide range of techniques and almost all his work is made in Scotland and Ireland. Having studied Fine Art Photography at Glasgow School of Art and Medieval and Modern History at Glasgow University, McElhinney has developed a particular interest in the combined histories of these nations:

"I'm an atypical artist in a way, in that I've started so late. I never thought about making art until I was in my early 40s... After graduating from art school in 2014, the news was full of coverage of people trying to come across the Mediterranean Sea. It was a real tragedy that was unravelling in front of our eyes on the television every night. That had an effect on me and I wanted to make work that responded to that. The first thing that I looked at was the clearances that had happened in Scotland throughout the 19th Century. There was a lot of migration out of Scotland, often in circumstances where that was forced. In a way, I'm not Scottish, I'm an Irish Scot. All my family, on both sides, have come from Ireland and the names of my four grandparents are all Irish. That led me to Donegal, where the McElhinneys came from in the 1870s when they moved to Scotland, looking at things in a more personal way, it was really quite moving, retracing the steps back to the source."

Frank McElhinney

Frank McElhinney is a visual artist based in Scotland. Solo exhibitions include *Eist* (2021), at the Regional Cultural Centre, Letterkenny, Donegal, Ireland; *A Broken Line*, The Auld Kirk Museum, Kirkintilloch (2017), and *45 Sun Pictures in Scotland*, Glasgow School of Art (2015). Group exhibitions, both local and international, include *Scotland Small?* at the Royal Scottish Academy, Edinburgh (2022); *Impression Remains*, at the Finnish Museum of Photography, Helsinki as part of the Finnish Darkroom Festival 2022; *Tabula Rasa*, at Kaunas Photography Gallery, Lithuania (2015) and *Street Level Photoworks* (2016); and the *Jill Todd Photographic Award*, in which he was the recipient of the first prize in 2014. In 2018, *Postcards from Scotland* was produced as an audio-visual work and presented at the NIDA International Photography Symposium in Lithuania and as part of *La Nuit de l'Instant* (2018), in partnership with the Marseille Centre of Photography. His online exhibition and associated events around *Only for Freedom* was supported by Street Level Photoworks in 2020. His work extends to public engagement activity around various techniques and themes within his work, such as solargraphy, pinhole and kite aerial photography.

This exhibition is the outcome of residency exchange programme in 2019 between Street Level Photoworks and Artlink, Fort Dunree in Donegal, a project which aims to strengthen dialogue and co-operation between Scotland and other European countries, supported by British Council Scotland and Arts Council Ireland. He was also a recipient of an RSA Residency at An Cridhe, Isle of Coll, in late 2019. All the work in the exhibition was made in the facilities and darkroom at Street Level Photoworks.

NOTES ON FLIGHT

FRANK McELHINNEY

Flight is an exhibition of photographs made in Ireland and Scotland that reflects on the Great Famine of 1845-52, and the resulting mass migration of Irish people into the West of Scotland. The work was begun in late 2019 during a month long residency in county Donegal. My great grandparents William and Catherine were born during An Gorta Mór and came to Glasgow shortly after they were married at Saint Johnstown, Donegal in 1871. During the residency I became mildly obsessed with migratory swans. I also made a decision to find out more about the calamitous famine years. After a quiet period due to the Covid pandemic I made two long trips down the West coast of Ireland from North to South. I also travelled to the Scottish islands of Islay and Vatersay where migrant ships leaving Ireland had wrecked with the loss of hundreds of souls. I travelled to all points on land where I could see Ailsa Craig from different angles, and cruised around it on the Waverley imagining how hundreds of thousands of migrants have encountered this navigational 'Paddy's Milestone' over many years. In the Scottish Highlands and on the Isle of Coll I saw piers, roads and walls constructed as 'relief works' by Scots who were also suffering, though rarely dying, as a result of the famine.

In Flight I have shared many more pictures on paper than there are years passed since the Great Famine. What happened to the Irish one hundred and seventy years ago should never be forgotten in part because it was as much to do with government policy and the greed of landowners as with the natural disaster of the potato blight. My hope is that these photographs of a mass of swans in chaotic flight, of an old country left behind, of structures built under great duress by our stricken ancestors, and of a few young men from the next generation, speak to a human sensibility that reminds us not just where we have come from but also our responsibility towards those who remain in perilous flight. - Frank McElhinney

LIST OF WORKS

- 1. éist (Listen):** Audio recording, duration five minutes.
- 2. Leaves:** A silver gelatin photogram of diseased potato leaves.
- 3. Relief works:** Three silver gelatin prints. These are Healy's Pass on the Kerry/Cork border, the Famine Wall over the summit of Beinn Dearg, and the old pier Arinagour, Isle of Coll. In Scotland, as in Ireland, public works were put in place after 1845 to force starving people to work in return for a pittance of pay.
- 4. Glasgow Burials:** Two scrolls covered in scorch marks. The smaller scroll contains 8,259 marks and the larger one 18,889. These are the numbers of people buried in Glasgow during the years 1845 and 1847.
- 5. Burial Pits:** Colour Instax print. Aerial view. In the years 1845-1848 several thousand coffinless bodies were buried in pits at Abbeystrowry cemetery outside Skibbereen.
- 6. Mark 15:34:** An Irish New Testament dated 1852. Mark 15:34, written in Aramaic, reads, "Eloi, Eloi, Lama Sabacthani?" The final words of Jesus in the bible story, meaning "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"
- 7. Cracked Wall:** Silver gelatin print. The cracked wall of a ruined farmhouse, Roosky, Castle Forward, County Donegal. My great grand parents left this farmhouse for Glasgow shortly after they were married in 1871. Both were born during the famine.
- 8. Illustrated London News engravings:** Digital prints of newspaper illustrations published during the famine. *Images courtesy of Ireland's Great Hunger Museum, Quinnipiac University, Connecticut.
- 9. 215° South West:** Silk Satin Banner. A straight line from Glasgow to Skibbereen lies on the orientation 215° South West. It passes through Ailsa Craig and Belfast. Banner image is a solargraph made on Hamilton Hill, Glasgow facing this direction.
- 10. Old Country:** One hundred silver gelatin prints. Views from the 'wild' Atlantic coast of Ireland. Immigrants hold images of home in memory. Some recognised landmarks, some more personal.
- 11. Quotations:** Handwritten quotations in pencil on two columns.
- 12. Black Horse:** Direct positive silver gelatin print, altered with birch charcoal.
- 13. Swan:** Framed silver gelatin print. Whooper swan

14. Angel of History: Postcard. Angelus Novus (New Angel) monoprint by Paul Klee / Walter Benjamin's Angel of History.

15. Deserted Village: Six framed silver gelatin prints. Aerial photographs of 'the Deserted Village' on Achill Island, Mayo. Deserted as a result of the famine.

16. Fleet: Seventy seven cliché verre silver gelatin prints. A fleet of ships.

17. Milestone: Six framed silver gelatin prints. Views of Ailsa Craig / 'Paddy's Milestone', a volcanic outcrop in the Clyde estuary located half way between Belfast & Glasgow. A navigation point for migrants passing into a new life.

18. Swans Flying in Darkness: An array of one hundred and forty six silver gelatin prints showing countless Whooper swans flying in and out of Inch Levels, Donegal at dusk and dawn. These swans migrate annually between Iceland and Ireland.

19. Passengers: Thousands of names written in pencil on four columns. History does not record the names of the people who migrated from Ireland to Scotland during and immediately after the famine as they were, at that time, 'internal migrants' moving within the country of Britain. The names used for the drawing have come from passenger lists of people who sailed out of Liverpool for North America. Many of them would have travelled to Liverpool via Glasgow.

20. Wreck of the Exmouth: Shipwreck model made of birch, jute twine, birch oil, and silver gelatin print showing the Rhinns of Islay. The Exmouth sailed out of Derry in April 1847, was caught in a storm and wrecked on the Rhinns of Islay, with the loss of two hundred and forty migrants bound for Canada. Almost all were women and children travelling to join their male relations.

21. Birch: Thirty two silver gelatin photograms. Each year a mature birch tree releases up to one million tiny seeds. The seeds have wings to fly on the wind. Birch is known as a pioneer species, it will take root and grow almost anywhere.

22. Waterline: Six Instax prints. When the Irish came to the West of Scotland, many found work on construction projects. Glasgow's first reliable fresh water supply was piped from lochs in the Trossachs during the 1850s.

23. Kingshill and Ravenscraig: Twelve Instax prints. These were once industrial sites where my grandfathers worked, one a coal miner at Kingshill from Mayo, the other a platelayer at Ravenscraig whose parents were from Donegal. Now both sites are returned to birch.

24. Connor and Euan: Framed silver gelatin print. These are my sons, Connor Patrick McElhinney and Euan Francis McElhinney. My father is ninety years old and has many grand children. Connor is the youngest of them, the last of the McElhinneys, until the next generation begins.

Please see overleaf for map of works

MAP

