

A Gold Medal for founders of Ireland Famine Museum: Eire Society salutes Jim and Caroilin Callery

By Catherine B. Shannon, Special to Boston Irish
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Father and daughter, Jim and Caroilin Callery, are the founders of Ireland's National Famine Museum and The National Famine Way.

Ever since the early 1990s, academic research and scholarly publications on the causes, nature, and broad impact of Ireland's Great Famine have grown immensely and served to break the public silence that surrounded the famine experience in Ireland and within its global diaspora.

Much of the shame and psychological trauma that characterized communal and personal memories of that tragic era were replaced by a deep desire to honor and commemorate those who died as well as those who were forced to flee their homeland. Memorials reflecting this new disposition were erected in Ireland, and globally in places like Boston, New York, and Toronto, where descendants of famine emigrants found a better life.

Within Ireland, James and Caroilin Callery have been trailblazers in making the complexities of an Gorta Mor accessible and relevant to academic researchers, students, and the general public.



Ireland's National Famine Museum offers history lessons in Strokestown Park, Co. Roscommon

In 1979, initially for business purposes, Jim bought the historic Strokestown Park Estate close to his Co. Roscommon birthplace. However, when inspecting the library of the estate's "Big House," he discovered an extensive archive that documented the impact of the 1840s famine on Strokestown's impoverished cottiers as well as on its heavily indebted owner, Major Denis Mahon. The most impactful document Jim found was a petition begging for food and assistance from the tenants of the townland of Cloonahen, where he was born and raised.

In addition, the archive contained detailed plans, accounts, and names related to the “assisted emigration scheme” that Major Mahon and his agent implemented in the spring of 1847 to send 1,490 of his poorest tenants to Canada as a way to reduce the estate’s poor-law taxes and consolidate its land holdings. Jim quickly appreciated that by publishing the names of those sent abroad, their identities and human dignity would be restored.

He abandoned his plan to demolish Strokestown Park House and set out immediately to implement his vision of making Strokestown House and its extensive archive a center of famine research and public education that would not only honor the famine dead and those exiled, but also would serve to disseminate the lessons and legacy of an Gorta Mor for generations to come.

Jim fully restored the Palladian Manor House and Gardens, which provide visitors with insights into the lifestyle as well as challenges facing Irish landlords in the 19th century. The archive became the centerpiece of Ireland’s National Famine Museum, which was opened by President Mary Robinson in 1994. In 2017, Jim was awarded the European Heritage Nostra Award for the largest act of private philanthropy for cultural heritage in Ireland’s history. His vision now realized, Strokestown Park and Museum is one of the most visited heritage sites in Ireland.

Caroilin Callery, Jim’s daughter, shared and expanded her father’s vision when, in 2013, she organized the “Gathering” event, which brought from Canada to Strokestown the descendants of twelve-year-old Daniel Tighe, who had been among the 1,490 sent into exile. Working with researchers at the University of Toronto, Cariolin helped to preserve in historical databases accounts of the lives and fortunes of many of the 1490 and their descendants.



In 2015, under Caroilin's direction, the biannual Irish Famine Summer School at Strokestown was launched. It has attracted dozens of scholars and students from Ireland and around the globe. A firm believer in making history visible with re-enactment, Caroilin was the inspiration for the launch in 2019 of Ireland's National Famine Way, which retraces the 162-kilometer route that the 1847 Strokestown emigrants walked to Dublin en route to North America.

Three years later, in collaboration with Dr. Eamonn McKee, a noted Irish diplomat, Caroilin launched the Global Irish Famine Way, which will establish memorial sites in North America, Australia, Britain, South Africa, and Argentina where Irish emigrants settled. These properties will feature the same iconic children's Bronze Shoes that mark the Irish Famine Way and raise awareness of the struggles and hopes of all children challenged then and now by poverty, food insecurity and forced migration.

Between 2017 and 2019, working with the Irish Heritage Trust, Caroilin ran the Great Irish Famine Roadshow, which collected and preserved on video Irish emigrant stories in both the United States and Canada. Owing to the genius, generosity, and dedication of Jim and Caroilin Callery, the Irish people and its diaspora are more conscious of their own history and the broader legacy of the Irish experience in our contemporary world. Jim and Caroilin are highly qualified and deserving recipients of the Eire Society's Gold Medal for 2026.

Submitted for the Eire Society by Catherine B. Shannon