



The Great Irish Famine

A Short History

THE GREAT IRISH FAMINE, 1845-1852

The Great Irish Famine was one of the greatest social disasters in nineteenth-century Europe. Over a million people died and a further million and a quarter fled the country for distant lands. By 1861 the population of Ireland had been reduced from nearly nine million to six million. Close to 300,000 family holdings were eliminated, the cottier class with less than one acre virtually disappeared and many Irish towns were socially and economically devastated.

The Famine may also be called an age of clearances as 100,000 farm families were evicted by landlords, their holdings absorbed into larger farms and demesnes. As a consequence, there was a great increase in farms over fifty acres by 1851. Cattle and sheep once again came to dominate the emptied landscapes.

IRELAND ON THE EVE OF THE FAMINE

In the pre-Famine period, Ireland underwent a massive population explosion. Ireland's population increased from 6.8 million to 8.2 million in the two decades since the first official census of population in 1821. With an average of about 700

people per square mile, Ireland was second only to Belgium in terms of population density in Europe. This significant increase in population, most pronounced in the south and western counties, was mostly due to early marriages, a high birth rate and a shift to widespread tillage production. Increasing population levels were also bolstered by the European Wars of 1792-1815, when Irish farmers and landowners secured high prices for provisions. In addition, cottage industries, primarily based on cotton and wool, provided extra income for Irish families.

“ THEY LIVE ON POTATOES, MILK AND BUTTER. SCARCE ANY BUT WHAT KEEPS A COW OR TWO. THEY ARE NOT ALLOWED TO KEEP PIGS IN GENERAL, BUT MANY WILL KEEP A TOLERABLE QUANTITY OF POULTRY. THE MEN DIG TURF AND PLANT POTATOES, AND WORK FOR THEIR LANDLORD AND THE WOMEN PAY THE RENT BY SPINNING. ”

- Arthur Young, "A Tour in Ireland", 1780, p. 216-

This changed dramatically after the defeat of Napoleon in 1815, when the Irish economy went into decline. This was exacerbated by a series of poor harvests and the decline of the cottage industries. Much of the land of Ireland was rented to middlemen on long and favourable leases. Tenants and sub-tenants had been allowed to subdivide the land with disastrous consequences.

Poverty was widespread by the early 1840s and efforts to promote agricultural improvement had mostly failed. Three million landless labourers and cottiers existed without regular employment. The poorest of the poor lived in one-roomed mud cabins with a patch of land on which to grow potatoes.



Reconstructed Cottier's Cabin, UCC

THE IRISH POOR LAW

On the eve of the Great Famine, Ireland's destitute poor were provided for under the terms of the Irish Poor Law of 1838. The new legislation divided the country into 130 Poor Law Unions. A workhouse was built in a central location in each union, financed by poor rates collected by locally-elected Poor Law guardians.

The Irish Poor Law was modelled on the English equivalent but with some notable differences. British policy-makers believed that Irish poverty derived from the innate moral failings in the Irish character and that any new relief mechanism should contribute to social improvement and encourage self-reliance. Therefore, unlike the 'paupers' in England who had a legal right to relief, only the inmates of the Irish workhouses could benefit from the provisions of the Poor Law.

The prospect of the 'poorhouse' struck fear into the hearts of Ireland rural poor even before the Famine and in the context of the repeated crop failures of the mid-1840s, it became the last desperate refuge and hope for survival for starving Irish families who clamoured at its gates. By the time the Great Famine had run its course, over 200,000 people had died within the confines of the workhouses.

LANDED ESTATES IN IRELAND

From the Tudor conquest of the sixteenth century to the early twentieth century, the vast majority of people in Ireland were connected to a landed estate. Estates varied in size from the smallest at 500 acres to large magnates such as Trinity College which, by the mid-nineteenth century, owned close to 190,000 acres.

Most landlords rented land to large farmers who, in turn, sub-let, and by the end of the eighteenth century much of the land of Ireland was in the

hands of middlemen who had been granted long and favourable leases. To manage the affairs of an estate, a land agent was employed to carry out the day-to-day business, a system that suited many, including those absentee landlords who resided elsewhere.

The landed estate was at the heart of the rural economy in Ireland and the period 1720-1840 represented the golden age of the landlord families. Surrounded by an extensive demesne the 'Big House' was an important source of local employment. On the eve of the great Famine many of these great houses were extensively mortgaged. The Famine would intensify the owner's financial difficulties and more than 25 percent of the land of Ireland changed hands in the early 1850s following the passing of the Encumbered Estates Act in 1849.

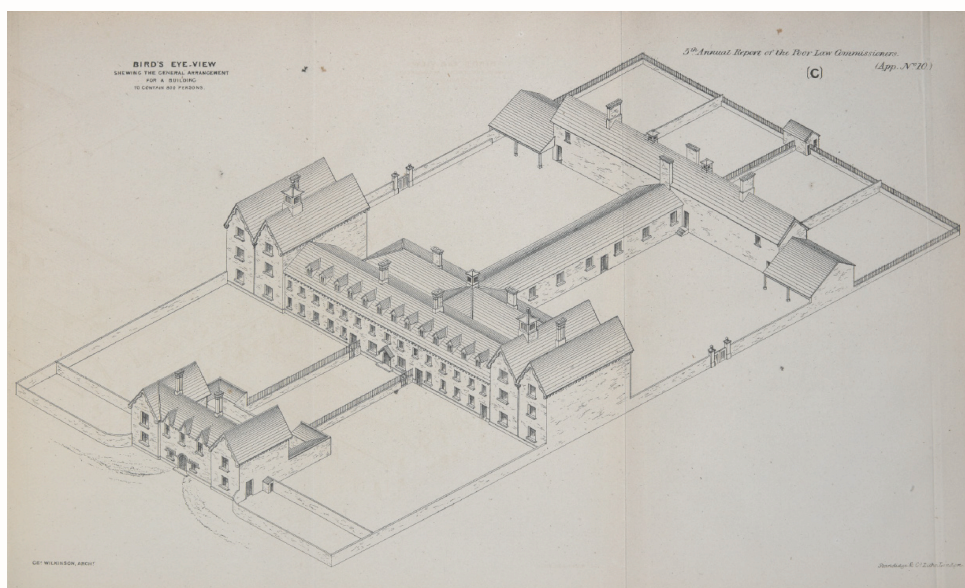
POTATO BLIGHT

In early September 1845 the first signs of *Phytophthora infestans*, or the potato blight as it was more commonly known, were noted in Ireland. The blight is a fungal infection, which thrives in damp, mild weather conditions turning the potato flower and stalk black and causing the tuber to putrefy.

The potato blight originated in the Andes region of South America and reached Europe via America by 1843. Holland, Belgium, parts of Scandinavia and Scotland all endured similar failures of the crop throughout the mid-1840s before the blight reached Ireland.

By the mid-nineteenth century more than three million people in Ireland were entirely dependent on the potato as their staple food. It could be grown with great success on poor and inferior soil but was prone to failure. Ireland was accustomed to famine as there had been localised occurrences throughout the early 1800s.

Bird's eye view of the general arrangement for a building to contain 800 persons. [Source, 5th Annual Report of the Poor Law Commissioners, Appendix no. 10]



GOVERNMENT POLICY

Generally, the Conservative party (Tories) and the Liberal party (Whigs) in the British House of Commons considered that an Irish catastrophe was inevitable - the result of failures in the Irish character. Providentialists saw the Famine as the will of God - a visitation upon the Irish as a corrective to their over-breeding and over-dependence on the potato. The Victorian policy of laissez-faire encouraged people to stand on their own two feet, without government interference in trade.

RELIEF MEASURES

From mid-September 1845 Sir Robert Peel received a deluge of daily correspondence about the state of the potato crop in Ireland. As Conservative Prime Minister since 1841, it was his responsibility to decide the best course of action in the face of the impending food shortages in Ireland.

At an emergency cabinet meeting on 31 October 1845, Peel presented his proposals for relief measures in Ireland. These would run parallel, but separately, to the indoor relief provided by workhouses under the Irish Poor Law of 1838.

His first action was to authorise the Lord Lieutenant to establish a Relief Commission. Its brief was to coordinate and oversee relief efforts in Ireland and

to support the activities of local relief committees. Legislation was passed in January 1846 to finance public works under the jurisdiction of the Board of Works. The works, funded in equal parts by government grants and local subscriptions, were intended to provide employment for the hungry in the short term, and contribute to Ireland's economic development in the long term.

People identified as eligible for relief by local relief committees were employed on these schemes which included breaking stones, laying roadways and carrying out other heavy manual labour. Employment on the schemes, particularly in the positions of 'ganger' and 'foreman' was highly sought after.

Assistant Secretary to the Treasury, Charles Trevelyan was put in charge of Irish Famine Relief and ensured strict budgeting around the distribution of relief funds. In line with the policy of laissez-faire, his guiding principles were to limit the levels of state intervention.

In November 1845 Peel arranged the purchase of £100,000 worth of Indian corn (yellow maize) from America, in the hope of preventing some of the distress in Ireland and to keep food prices from escalating. Peel's intentions were good, but Indian corn was very difficult to mill, and hunger drove some people to eat it raw, which caused health problems.

Unpopular at first, the demand for 'Peel's Brimstone' increased as the famine worsened. In the words of Commissary General, Sir Edward Pine-Coffin, in a letter to Trevelyan on 30 March 1846, the Indian meal was 'much too good a thing to be long rejected by starving people'.

Despite its limitations, Peel's policy was relatively successful in dealing with the partial potato failure of 1845-46. Few died that year.

PUBLIC WORKS

John Russell's Whig government replaced the Tory administration on 29 June 1846, on the cusp of a second, more devastating crop failure. In August 1846 all hope of a short-lived famine disappeared. The new crop was infected with blight and the total yield of potatoes was enough to feed the population for just one month.

Committed to the Whig policy of political economy and influenced by popular opinion and a certain amount of 'charity fatigue' amongst the British voters, John Russell's administration imposed stricter, more direct Treasury control of relief measures. Public works became the principal vehicle of relief and the role of local relief committees was limited to 'preparing lists of paupers' eligible for relief.

The Liberal Government also replaced daily wages on public works with a 'piece work' payments system which meant that the weakest and most malnourished workers earned less than was required to feed their families. This did not stem the flood of starving poor who clamoured for work from October 1846, (when the Board of Works registered 772,994 applications), or the inefficiencies and abuses rife within the system.

As autumn turned to winter, thousands died of starvation and famine fever on Ireland's freezing work sites. The escalating costs, demoralising mortality

rates and the force of British popular opinion led to the government's decision in the early months of 1847 to replace the public works with the Poor Law as the primary vehicle for famine relief.

SOUP KITCHENS

The first step in this direction was the Temporary Relief Act of February 1847 which provided for a network of state-sponsored soup kitchens to distribute food while the public works were wound down. Lengthy bureaucratic delays meant that the public works were closed before the apparatus for setting up the soup kitchens was in place and thousands of workers and their families suffered terribly in the interim. Even the heroic efforts of private and public charities such as the Quakers were not enough to meet the needs of the starving poor.

Newspapers published horrific accounts of what was happening in Ireland. Contemporary letters and journals and newspapers give a sense of the suffering in the country. Travellers came to Ireland to bring charity and brought away vivid descriptions of conditions that seemed impossible in a civilised country in the western world. Magazines such as the *Illustrated London News* sent over artists who brought back realistic drawings of hunger, misery and deprivation.

By July of 1847, when the soup kitchens finally came into full operation, some three million people a day were surviving on its meagre rations. The relatively successful scheme was wound down in August and September 1847 to make way for the provisions of the amended Poor Law.

While the blight did not reappear in the autumn of 1847, the harvest was small because so few potatoes had been planted. The grain depots were closed, the public works abandoned and the soup kitchens systematically shut down from the late summer. With no other option, the destitute poor

clamoured for entry to the workhouses. Newspapers reported food riots in some places and violent scenes in towns and cities where the poor competed for relief. By the end of August 1847, the country's workhouses were full and several unions were on the verge of bankruptcy.

FAMINE FEVER

Disease followed in the wake of the food shortages in the poorest parts of country. Most famine-related diseases thrived due to the unsanitary and cramped living conditions of the poor who were already weakened by malnutrition. Typhus and relapsing fever, the most common forms of what was known as 'famine fever', were carried by lice and spread through close contact. The destitute poor took to the roads in search of relief and the lice found new hosts at public works and in the county's crowded prisons and workhouses. Thousands were buried in unmarked lonely graves.

The Blight returned to the potato crop again in 1848. The Poor Law Unions ran out of funds and the Quakers were unable to re-establish soup kitchens as their resources had run out. The government allowed the policy of grain export to continue, provoking riots in Irish ports where ships were being loaded with food. As disease and hunger ravaged the country, the workhouses were overrun with desperate people trying to escape the horrors outside. By the end of the year cholera had appeared and soon reached epidemic proportions.

THE POOR LAW EXTENSION ACT, JUNE 1847

The Poor Law Extension Act was passed in June 1847. The new legislation shifted the burden of famine relief on to the local rate payers. Relief was now available outside the workhouse to certain cat-

egories of 'pauper' - namely the aged, infirm, the sick and widows with two or more children. The act also sanctioned outdoor relief in the form of meagre rations for the 'able-bodied' poor but only on a short-term basis and when the workhouses were full. As a concession to landlords, the Gregory Clause denied relief to those occupying more than a quarter of an acre of land. While the Poor Law Extension Act may have been intended to catalyse a long-term process of social and economic regeneration, in the interim it ushered in a wide scale humanitarian crisis.

FAMINE CLEARANCES

During the early stages of the Famine, landlords often granted abatements of rent, forgave arrears or allowed reduced payments. However, the Poor Law Extension Act, transferred the cost of famine relief to the Irish landlords. Their incomes were already reduced due to the high numbers of poor tenants paying little or no rent, and they were liable for the entire poor rate for holdings valued at £4 or less. Anticipating a surge in taxation to finance the amended Poor Law, many landlords chose to clear their estates of the smallest rate-bearing holdings and re-let the properties in bigger plots to people with more money. The notorious Gregory Clause proved highly effective in facilitating these clearances.

It is estimated that over 100,000 families (approximately half a million people) were evicted throughout Ireland during the Famine years. In most cases their houses were demolished to prevent re-habitation. Some were forced into workhouses, some managed to emigrate but many others died. These wide scale Famine clearances left a legacy of bitterness that would be inflamed again during the Land League agitation of the 1880s.

EMIGRATION

Some landlords assisted their tenants with fares for [emigration](#). One-quarter of a million people left Ireland in 1847 and 200,000 or more every year for the next five years. In 1851 three quarters of a million Irish emigrants were living in Britain – mainly in the growing industrial cities – and particularly in Liverpool (22 per cent of that city's population), Glasgow (15 per cent) and Manchester (13 per cent). As many as 108,000 Irish lived in London. On the other side of the Atlantic, New York in 1900 was second only to Dublin in the number of Irish residents. By the 1890s the proportion of Irish-born people living abroad moved close to 40 per cent. Well over five million emigrated to Canada, the US and [Australia](#) between 1845 and 1901.

Any illusion that the crisis was over in early 1848 was shattered when the weather changed in mid-June. In one of his regular letters to his family in Boston, James Prendergast described the situation in Kerry in October:

"The blight swept off the potatoe crop and this left provision short here. We have no sort of employment for the poor, and the workhouses are scarcely sufft [sufficient] to receive them. Farmers are oppressed with poor rates and other charges. Many are deserting their farms and flying to America as fast as they can. Destitution is seen almost everywhere."



Poor Law officials were overwhelmed by the sheer extent of destitution. The number of people receiving relief exceeded one million, over fifty unions were insolvent and the government was adamant that there would be no more aid from the Treasury. Instead, Russell's government introduced the unpopular Rate-in-Aid Act of March 1849 which imposed a levy on the more well-off unions in Ireland to be redistributed to the most impoverished unions.

RECOVERY AND LEGACY

Pressure on the Poor Law began to abate with the return of better harvests in much of Ireland after 1849. The return of the potato blight in some of the south western counties, however, made ongoing distress inevitable and Famine conditions prevailed in parts of Ireland right up to 1852. Ireland suffered over a million excess deaths under Sir John Russell's administration, victims of laissez-faire economic policy, a conviction that the Irish should help themselves and a conviction, articulated by Trevelyan in January 1848, with 'creating a permanent good out of a transient evil'.

Between 1845 and 1855 over 900,000 Irish people arrived in New York alone. Ireland continued to hemorrhage its population in the decades that followed. The scattering of the Irish emigrants across the world was to provide a critical foundation for the Fenian movement and the international support network that was vital to the Irish revolution.

The effects of the Great Famine of 1845-1852 reverberated through the rest of the nineteenth century and beyond. Its [consequences](#) included a dramatic [decline in population](#), significant changes in language, social patterns and farming, and the emergence of important movements for social and political reform.