

The Great Irish Famine



EARLY IRELAND

Human habitation in Ireland dates from the mesolithic (middle stone age) period, approximately 7,000 years B.C. The people are assumed to have been hunter-gatherers and fishermen. They showed great reverence for the dead, and left behind stone tombs like Newgrange, outside Dublin. About 3,500 years B.C., in the neolithic, or late stone age, Irish farmers cleared land, used stone tools, planted crops and kept sheep and cattle.(1.)

THE CELTS

The Celts began arriving from Europe as early as the 6th century B.C. They brought with them the iron-age culture. Celtic Ireland was divided into 150 little kingdoms, and five provinces, four surviving to today: Ulster, Munster, Leinster & Connacht. The extended family was the social unit and there were no towns. The Irish Celts spoke the Irish language, believed in druidism, and obeyed the laws interpreted by early lawyers called brehons.(2.)

ST. PATRICK & CHRISTIANITY

In the 5th century A.D. Irish pirates raided Britain and captured a 16 year-old Roman citizen named Patrick. He was kept as a slave in Ireland, and worked as a shepherd. He eventually escaped and returned home. When he was studying in Gaul (now France) he had recurring dreams in which the children of Ireland appeared to him, asking him to return. He came back to Ireland as a missionary, and by the time he died in 465 all of Ireland was Christian. St. Patrick is also credited with bringing the Latin alphabet to Ireland, and founding a great many monasteries. By the 8th century the Irish monks had made great technical advances in the craft of making illuminated manuscripts. The best example is the Book of Kells, an 8th century copy of the New Testament.

THE VIKINGS

The monks also worked elaborate ornamentation in bronze, enamel and gold.(3.) Rumors of these treasures brought on invasions by fleets of long boats carrying Danish Vikings. They deployed fortified settlements and built towns. In the year 841 they founded Dublin. (Dubh Linn meaning Black Pool)

THE NORMANS

The first Normans from England and Wales landed in Wexford, Ireland in 1169. They conquered the disunited Irish using armor, horses and fortified castles. The Normans brought with them the tradition of Common Law, based upon the personal ownership of property, in contrast with life under Irish Brehon Law where ownership was vested in the extended family or clan. However, the newcomers quickly adopted the Irish language, married into Irish families, and "it was said of them that they became more Irish than the Irish themselves." (4.)

STATUTES OF KILKENNY

The English crown wished to preserve the racial purity and cultural separateness of the colonizers. They instituted the Statutes of Kilkenny. These decreed that the two races, Norman and Gaelic (Irish) should remain separate. Marriage between races was made a capital offense. The statutes explained: "Whereas at the conquest of the land of Ireland and for a long time after, the English of the said land used the English language...Now many English of the said land, forsaking the English language, fashion, mode of riding, laws and usages, live and govern themselves according to the manners, fashion and language of the Irish enemies..." (5.)

The government responsible for the statutes was in control only in the area around Dublin, known as the English Pale. The effort to prevent assimilation to Irish ways led to the expression, "Beyond the Pale."

THE REFORMATION

In the 1530s England's King Henry began the process of breaking with the Catholic Church of Rome. This split led to the eventual foundation of the Church of England. The Reformation divided the Irish, who remained Catholic, from the English, who became Protestants. In 1601, at the battle of Kinsale, the Irish armies and their Spanish allies were defeated. For the first time all Ireland was governed by a strong English central administration based in Dublin.

THE PLANTATION

Another English policy to subdue Ireland was the colonization of Ulster with new settlers, mostly Scottish Presbyterians and English Protestants. This system of colonization was known as "a planting". The native Irish were driven off almost 500,000 acres of the best land in counties Tyrone, Donegal, Derry, Armagh and Cavan. The property was then consolidated and colonizers were 'planted' on large estates. (6.)

OLIVER CROMWELL

In 1641 the Irish rebelled against the English and Scottish who possessed their land, and were immediately caught up in the English civil war between Parliament and king. In 1649 Oliver Cromwell landed at Dublin with an army of 12,000 men. He was joined by the 8,000 strong parliamentary army. He successfully laid siege to the town of Drogheda, and on his orders the 2,699 men of the royalist garrison were put to death. Townspeople were also slaughtered. Cromwell reported that "We put to the sword the whole number of inhabitants. I do not think thirty of the whole number escaped with their lives." (7.)

Large-scale confiscation of land followed. The owners were driven off eleven million acres of land and it was given to the Protestant colonists. "Irish landowners found east of the river Shannon after 1 May, 1654 faced the death penalty or slavery in the West Indies and Barbados." (8.) The expression "To hell or Connaught" originated at this time: "those who did not leave their fertile fields and travel to the poor land west of the Shannon would be put to the sword." (9.)

PENAL LAWS

In the 1690s the Penal Laws, designed to repress the native Irish were introduced. The first ordered that no Catholic could have a gun, pistol, or sword. Over the next 30 years the other Penal laws followed: Irish Catholics were forbidden to receive an education, enter a profession, vote, hold public office, practice their religion, attend Catholic worship, engage in trade or commerce, purchase land, lease land, receive a gift of land or inherit land from a Protestant, rent land worth more than thirty shillings a year, own a horse of greater value than five pounds, be the guardian to a child, educate their own children or send a child abroad to receive an education. Edmund Burke, an Irish-born Protestant who became a British Member of Parliament, (MP) described the Penal laws 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." (11.) The Lord Chancellor was able to say, "The law does not suppose any such person to exist as an Irish Roman Catholic."



JONATHAN SWIFT

The eighteenth century in Ireland was a dismal time for the "untrustworthy majority." The Penal Laws, directed at their education, religion, and property rights, kept them poor and powerless. One who commented on their plight was Jonathan Swift, the author of Gulliver's Travels, and Dean of St. Patrick's Cathedral in Dublin.

In "A Short View of the Present State of Ireland" he singled out the practice of absentee landlordism, estimating that half the net revenues of Ireland were taken out of the country and spent in Britain. Ever increasing rent, the source of most revenue, Swift declared, "is squeezed out of the very blood, and vitals, and clothes, and dwellings of the tenants, who live worse than English beggars. The families of farmers who pay great rents [are] living in filth and nastiness upon buttermilk and potatoes, without a shoe or a stocking to their feet, or a house so convenient as an English hog sty to receive them. These may, indeed, be comfortable sights to an English spectator who comes for a short time to learn the language, and returns back to his own country, whither he finds all our wealth transmitted." (12.)

BERKELEY THE PHILOSOPHER

A contemporary and friend of Swift's, philosopher George Berkeley, wrote in a 1736 journal wondering "whether a foreigner could imagine that half of the people were starving in a country which sent out such plenty of provisions".

Berkeley had been to Rhode Island and seen Negro slavery on American plantations. Berkeley wrote, "The Negroes have a saying, 'If Negro was not a Negro, Irishman would be Negro.'" Berkeley added that the American Indians "are better clad and better lodged than the Irish cottagers." (13.)

SOCIAL STRUCTURE

The Act of Union, passed in 1800, abolished the independent Irish Parliament in Dublin, and brought Irish Administration under the British Parliament. Irish Protestants only were allowed to be British MPs. In 1829, after a long struggle, Irish Catholics achieved emancipation, and won the right to sit in British Parliament. However, "The bulk of the population lived in conditions of poverty and insecurity." (14.)

THE ASCENDANCY

At the top of the social pyramid was the Ascendancy class, the English and Anglo-Irish families who owned most of the land, and had almost limitless power over their tenants. Some of their estates were huge - the Earl of Lucan, for example, owned over 60,000 acres. Many of these landlords lived in England and were called "absentees". They used agents called "middlemen" to administer their property, and many of them had no interest in it except to spend the money the rents brought in.

FARMERS AND COTTIERS

It was a very unbalanced social structure. The farmers rented the land they worked, and those who could afford to rent large farms would break up some of the land into smaller plots. These were leased to "cottiers" or small farmers, under a system called "conacre." Nobody had security or tenure and rents were high. Very little cash was used in the economy. The cottier paid his rent by working for his landlord, and he could rear a pig to sell for the small amount of cash he might need to buy clothes or other necessary goods.

There was also a large population of agricultural laborers who traveled around looking for work. They were very badly off because not many Irish farmers could afford to hire them. "In 1835, an inquiry found that over two million people were without regular employment of any kind." (15.) Under the Irish Poor Law of 1838, workhouses were built in all parts of the country and financed by local taxpayers.

POTATO BLIGHT

This rickety system held together only because the rural peasants had a cheap and plentiful source of food. The potato, introduced to Ireland about 1590, could grow in the poorest conditions, with very little labor. This was important because laborers had to give most of their time to the farmers they worked for, and had very little time for their own crops.

"The actual cause of (potato crop) failure was phytophthora infestans - potato blight. The spores of the blight were carried by wind, rain and insects and came to Ireland from Britain and the European continent. A fungus affected the potato plants, producing black spots and a white mould on the leaves, soon rotting the potato into a pulp." (16.) By the summer of 1847, over three million people were being fed by government soup kitchens and those organized by Quakers. "So many people died in so short of time that mass graves were provided. (17.)

LAISSEZ-FAIRE

The dominant economic theory in mid-nineteenth century Britain was laissez-faire (meaning: 'let be'), which held that it was not a government's job to provide aid for its citizens, or to interfere with the free market of goods or trade. (18.)

Despite laissez-faire, the initial response to the Famine under British Prime Minister Sir Robert Peel, was "prompt, efficient and interventionist." (19.) He sent over a Scientific Commission to examine the facts. The commissioners reported that one-half of the crop was now destroyed, or unfit for use, but they incorrectly diagnosed the cause of the blight.

THE CORN LAWS

Food prices in Ireland were beginning to rise, and potato prices had doubled by December, 1845. Meanwhile, the Irish grain crop was being exported to Britain. (20.) Public meetings were held, and prominent citizens called for the exports to be stopped and for grain to be imported as well. However, this would have meant repealing the Corn Laws, and there was great opposition in Britain to this. (21.)

"The Corn Laws, an exception to the doctrine of laissez-faire, laid down that large taxes had to be paid on any foreign crops brought into Britain. This kept grain prices high, and the British traders would lose profits if the laws were repealed" (22.) Since the Act of Union made Ireland legally a part of the United Kingdom, its corn crop could

be moved to England without incurring the tax. However, corn crops brought into Ireland to relieve the famine could be taxed.

Prime Minister Peel pushed through a repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846. This split the Tory Party and Peel was forced to resign. In a powerful speech to Parliament he said, "Good God, are you to sit in cabinet and consider and calculate how much diarrhea, and bloody flux, and dysentery a people can bear before it becomes necessary for you to provide them with food?" (23.)

LORD JOHN RUSSELL

Peel was succeeded at Prime Minister by Lord John Russell, a rigid exponent of laissez-faire. In October, 1846, as it became clear that over ninety per cent of the potato crop of Ireland was blighted, Lord Russell set out his approach to the famine: "It must be thoroughly understood that we cannot feed the people... We can at best keep down prices where there is no regular market and prevent established dealers from raising prices much beyond the fair price with ordinary profits." (24.)

Russell's policies emphasized employment rather than food for famine victims, in the belief that private enterprise, not government, should be responsible for food provision. He also stressed that the cost of Irish relief work should be paid for by Irishmen. Peel's Relief Commission was abolished and relief work was put in the hands of 12,000 civil servants in the Board of Works who only found work for 750,000 of the starving people. In return for hard (and often pointless) work, starving peasants were paid starvation wages.

Tens of thousands of people died during the winter of 1846, but "Russell and his colleagues never conceived of interfering with the structure of the Irish economy in the ways that would have been necessary to prevent the worst effects of the famine." (25.)

PRIVATE RELIEF EFFORTS

The Society of Friends, or Quakers, first became involved with the Irish Famine in November, 1846, when some Dublin-based members formed a Central Relief Committee. They intended that their assistance supplement other relief. However, the relief provided by the Quakers proved crucial in keeping people alive when other relief systems failed. A number of Quakers were critical of government relief policies, holding them to be inadequate and misjudged.

The Quakers donated food, mostly American flour, rice, biscuits, and Indian meal along with clothes and bedding. They set up soup kitchens, purchased seed, and provided funds for local employment. During 1846-1847, the Quakers gave approximately 200,000 Pounds for relief in Ireland. (26.)

The British Relief Association was founded in 1847, and raised money in England, America and Australia. They benefited from a "Queen's Letter" from Victoria appealing for money to relieve the distress in Ireland. The total raised was 171,533 Pounds. A second "Queen's Letter" in October of 1847, reflected a hardening in British public opinion, as it raised hardly any additional funds. In total, the British Relief Association raised approximately 470,000 Pounds.

In August, 1847, when the Association had a balance of 200,000 Pounds, their agent in Ireland, Polish Count Strzelecki, proposed that the money be spent to help schoolchildren in the west of Ireland. The British Treasury Secretary, Charles Edward Trevelyan, warned against it, fearing "it might produce the impression that the lavish charitable system of last season was intended to be renewed." (27.) Strzelecki proved adamant and Trevelyan conceded that a small portion of the funds could be used for that purpose.

Donations for the Irish Famine came from distant and unexpected sources. Calcutta, India sent 16,500 Pounds in 1847, Bombay another 3,000. Florence, Italy, Antigua, France, Jamaica, and Barbados sent contributions. The Choctaw tribe in North America sent \$710. Many major cities in America set up Relief Committees for Ireland, and Jewish synagogues in America and Britain contributed generously.

EXPORTS

Ireland Before and After the Famine, author Cormac O'Grada documents that in 1845, a famine year in Ireland, 3,251,907 quarters (8 bushels = 1 quarter)) of corn were exported from Ireland to Britain. That same year, 257,257 sheep were exported to Britain. In 1846, another famine year, 480,827 swine, and 186,483 oxen were exported to Britain. (28.)

Cecil Woodham-Smith, considered the preeminent authority on the Irish Famine, wrote in The Great Hunger: Ireland 1845-1849 that, "...no issue has provoked so much anger or so embittered relations between the two countries (England and Ireland) as the indisputable fact that huge quantities of food were exported from Ireland to England throughout the period when the people of Ireland were dying of starvation." (29.)

"Although the potato crop failed, the country was still producing and exporting more than enough grain crops to feed the population. But that was a 'money crop' and not a 'food crop' and could not be interfered with." (30.) According to John Mitchel, quoted by Woodham-Smith, "Ireland was actually producing sufficient food, wool and flax, to feed and clothe not nine but eighteen millions of people," yet a ship sailing into an Irish port during the famine years with a cargo of grain was "sure to meet six ships sailing out with a similar cargo." One of the most remarkable facts about the famine period is that there was an average monthly export of food from Ireland worth 100,000 Pound Sterling. Almost throughout the five-year famine, Ireland remained a net exporter of food. (31.)

Dr. Christine Kinealy, a fellow at the University of Liverpool and the author of two scholarly texts on the Irish Famine: This Great Calamity and A Death-Dealing Famine, says that 9,992 calves were exported from Ireland to England during "Black'47", an increase of thirty-three percent from the previous year. In the twelve months following the second failure of the potato crop, 4,000 horses and ponies were exported. The export of livestock to Britain (with the exception of pigs) increased during the "famine". The export of bacon and ham increased. In total, over three million live animals were exported from Ireland between 1846-50, more than the number of people who emigrated during the famine years.

Dr. Kinealy's most recent work is documented in the spring, 1998 issue of "History Ireland". She states that almost 4,000 vessels carried food from Ireland to the ports of Bristol, Glasgow, Liverpool and London during 1847, when 400,000 Irish men, women and children died of starvation and related diseases. The food was shipped under guard from the most famine-stricken parts of Ireland: Ballina, Ballyshannon, Bantry, Dingle, Killala, Kilrush, Limerick, Sligo, Tralee and Westport.

During the first nine months of "Black '47" the export of grain-derived alcohol from Ireland to England included the following: 874,170 gallons of porter, 278,658 gallons of Guinness, and 183,392 gallons of whiskey. The total amount of grain-derived alcohol exported from Ireland in just nine months of Black'47 is 1,336,220 gallons!

A wide variety of commodities left Ireland during 1847, including peas, beans, onions, rabbits, salmon, oysters, herring, lard, honey, tongues, animal skins, rags, shoes, soap, glue and seed.

The most shocking export figures concern butter. Butter was shipped in firkins, each one holding nine gallons. In the first nine months of 1847, 56,557 firkins were exported from Ireland to Bristol, and 34,852 firkins were shipped to Liverpool. That works out to be 822,681 gallons of butter exported to England from Ireland during nine months of the worst year of "famine".

If the other three months of exports were at all comparable, then we can safely assume that a million gallons of butter left Ireland while 400,000 Irish people starved to death!

Dr. Kinealy's research proves beyond a reasonable doubt that there was sufficient food in Ireland to prevent mass starvation, and that the food was brought through the worst famine-stricken areas on its way to England. British regiments guarded the ports and warehouses in Ireland to guarantee absentee landlords and commodity speculators their "free market" profits.

When Ireland experienced an earlier famine in 1782-83, ports were closed in order to keep home grown food for domestic consumption. Food prices were immediately reduced within Ireland. The merchants lobbied against such efforts, but their protests were over-riden. Everyone recognized that the interests of the merchants and the distressed people were irreconcilable. In the Great Famine, that recognition was disregarded.

EVICCTIONS

During the worst months of the famine, in the winter of 1846-47, tens of thousands of tenants fell in arrears of rent and were evicted from their homes. "A nationwide system of ousting the peasantry began to set in, with absentee landlords, and some resident landlords as well, more determined than ever to rid Ireland of its 'surplus' Irish." (32.) With potato cultivation over because of the blight, tenants could pay no rents. Sheep and cattle could pay rent, so landlords decided to give the land over to them. "In 1850, over 104,000 people were evicted." (33.)

MORTALITY

In 1841 the population of Ireland was given as 8,175,124. "It is almost certain that, owing to geographical difficulties and the unwillingness of the people to be registered, the census of 1841 gave a total smaller than the population in fact was. Officers engaged in relief work put the population as much as 25 per cent higher; land lords distributing relief were horrified when providing, as they imagined, food for 60 persons, to find more than 400." By 1851, after the famine, the population had dropped to 6,552,385. "The census commissioners calculated that, at the normal rate of increase, the total should have been 9,018,799 so the loss of at least 2.5 million persons had taken place." (34.)

TREVELYAN

Charles Edward Trevelyan, the British Treasury Secretary in charge, was the civil servant most involved in Irish famine relief (35.) He firmly believed in the economic principles of laissez-faire, or noninterference by the government. Trevelyan opposed expenditure and raising taxes, advocating self-sufficiency. He was convinced of Malthus' theory that any attempt to raise the standard of living of the poorest section of the population above subsistence level would only result in increased population which would make matters worse.

In October, 1846, Trevelyan wrote that the overpopulation of Ireland "being altogether beyond the power of man, the cure has been applied by the direct stroke of an all-wise Providence in a manner as unexpected and as unthought of as it is likely to be effectual." Two years later after perhaps a million people had died, he wrote, "The matter is awfully serious, but we are in the hands of Providence, without a possibility of averting the catastrophe if it is to happen. We can only wait the result." Later that year Trevelyan declared: "The great evil with which we have to contend is not the physical evil of the famine, but the moral evil of the selfish, perverse and turbulent character of the people." (36.) In 1848 Trevelyan was knighted for his services in Ireland.

THE TIMES OF LONDON

The lead story in the August 30th, 1847 edition of the English newspaper, the Times said, "In no other country have men talked treason until they are hoarse, and then gone about begging for sympathy from their oppressors. In no other country have the people been so liberally and unthriftily helped by the nation they denounced and defied." (37.)

In another edition: "They are going. They are going with a vengeance. Soon a Celt will be as rare in Ireland as a Red Indian on the streets of Manhattan...Law has ridden through, it has been taught with bayonets, and interpreted with ruin. Townships levelled to the ground, straggling columns of exiles, workhouses multiplied, and still crowded, express the determination of the Legislature to rescue Ireland from its slovenly old barbarism, and to plant there the institutions of this more civilized land."

"WHAT WE REALLY WANT"

In 1848 Sir Charles Wood, the English Chancellor of the Exchequer, wrote to an Irish landlord: "I am not at all appalled by your tenantry going. That seems to be a necessary part of the process... We must not complain of what we really want to obtain." (39.)

In 1849 Edward Twisleton, the Irish poor Law Commissioner, resigned to protest lack of aid from Britain. The Earl of Clarendon, acting as Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, told British Prime Minister Lord John Russell the same day, that "He (Twisleton) thinks that the destitution here [in Ireland] is so horrible, and the indifference of the House of Commons is so manifest, that he is an unfit agent for a policy that must be one of extermination."

James Wilson, the Editor of the British publication, The Economist, responded to Irish pleas for assistance during the famine by saying, "It is no man's business to provide for another." He thought it was wrong for officials to reallocate scarce resources, since "If left to the natural law of distribution, those who deserve more would obtain it." Wilson's statements echo those of Thomas Malthus, a political economist who died in 1834. In his most influential work, "Essay on the Principle of Population", he wrote:

"If he cannot get sustenance from his parents, on whom he has a just demand, and if society does not want his labor, he has no claim of right to the smallest portion of food and, in fact, has no business to be where he is."

CHOLERA

In December, 1848, Cholera began to spread through many of the overcrowded workhouses, pauper hospitals, and crammed jails in Ireland. On April 26th, 1849, Lord Clarendon wrote to Prime Minister Russell: "...it is enough to drive one mad, day after day, to read the appeals that are made and meet them all with a negative...At Westport, and other places in Mayo, they have not a shilling to make preparations for the cholera, but no assistance can be given, and there is no credit for anything, as all our contractors are ruined. Surely this is a state of things to justify you asking the House of Commons for an advance, for I don't think there is another legislature in Europe that would disregard such suffering as now exists in the west of Ireland, or coldly persist in a policy of extermination." No advance was granted. (40.)

WORKHOUSES

Initially, the greatest relief to the starving came through the Poor Law (1838), which aimed to provide accommodation for the absolutely destitute in workhouses. There were 130 of them in Ireland in 1845.

"However, the conditions for entry were so strict that people would only go to them as a last resort. Families were torn apart, as women and men lived in different parts of the workhouse, and children were kept separately from adults. Inmates were forbidden to leave, and the food provided consisted of two meals a day, of oatmeal, potatoes and buttermilk. There were strict rules against bad language, alcohol, laziness, malingering and disobedience, and meals had to be eaten in silence. Able-bodied adults had to work at such jobs as knitting (for women) and breaking stones (for men). Children were given industrial training of some sort." (41.)

EMIGRATION

Between 1845 and 1855, nearly two million people had emigrated from Ireland to America and Australia, and another 750,000 to Britain. The Poor Law Extension Act, which made landlords responsible for the maintenance of their own poor, induced some to clear their estates by paying for emigration of the poorer tenants. Although some landlords did so out of humanitarian motives, there were undoubtedly benefits to them, especially those who wanted to consolidate their land holdings or change from the cultivation of land to beef and dairy farming. (42.) Emigration soared from 75,000 in 1845 to 250,000 in 1851. "This chaotic, panic-stricken and unregulated exodus was the largest single population movement of the nineteenth century." (43.) Thousands of emigrants died onboard 'coffin ships' during the Atlantic crossing. These were little more than rotting hulks, and their owners were plying a speculative trade. There were 17,465 documented deaths in 1847 alone. "Thousands more died at disembarkation centers." (44.)

On August 4th, 1847, The Toronto Globe reported on the arrival of emigrant ships: "The Virginus from Liverpool, with 496 passengers, had lost 158 by death, nearly one third of the whole, and she had 180 sick; above one half of the whole will never see their home in the New World. A medical officer at the quarantine station on Grosse Ile off Quebec reported that 'the few who were able to come on deck were ghastly, yellow-looking spectres, unshaven and hollow-checked... not more than six or eight were really healthy and able to exert themselves.' The crew of the ship were all ill, and seven had *died*. On the Erin's Queen 78 passengers had died and 104 were sick. On this ship the captain had to bribe the seamen with a sovereign for each body brought out from the hold. The dead sometimes had to be dragged out with boat hooks, since even their own relatives refused to touch them." (45.)

CENSUS COMMISSIONERS SEE IRELAND BETTER OFF AFTER FAMINE

After mass starvation, death, eviction, and large scale emigration, the British Census Commissioners proclaimed in 1851 that Ireland benefited from the Famine:

"In conclusion, we feel it will be gratifying to your Excellency to find that although the population has been diminished in so remarkable a manner by famine, disease and emigration between 1841 and 1851, and has been since decreasing, the results of the Irish census of 1851 are, on the whole, satisfactory, demonstrating as they do the general advancement of the country." (47.)

