

Introduction

Beginning in 1845 and lasting for six years, the potato famine killed over a million men, women and children in Ireland and caused another million to flee the country.

Ireland in the mid-1800s was an agricultural nation, populated by eight million persons who were among the poorest people in the Western World. Only about a quarter of the population could read and write. Life expectancy was short, just 40 years for men. The Irish married quite young, girls at 16, boys at 17 or 18, and tended to have large families, although infant mortality was also quite high.

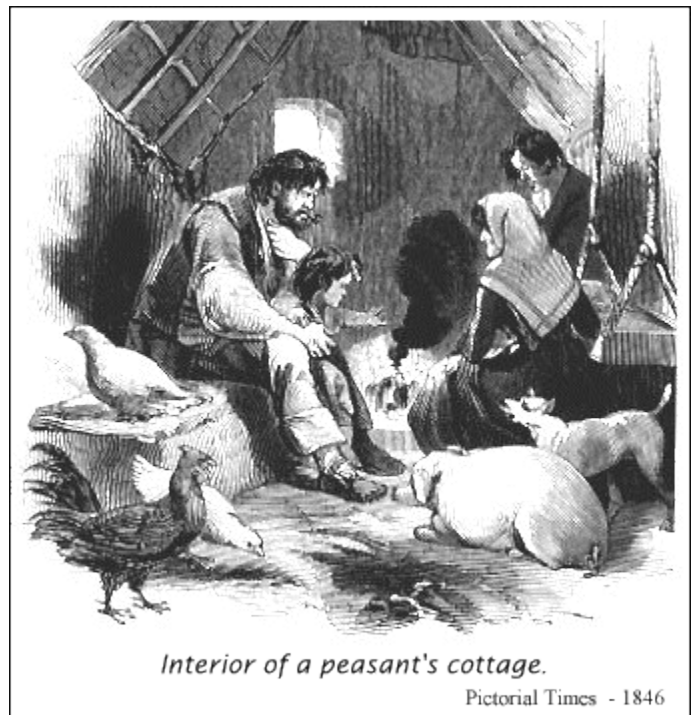
A British survey in 1835 found half of the rural families in Ireland living in single-room, windowless mud cabins that didn't have chimneys. The people lived in small communal clusters, known as clachans, spread out among the beautiful countryside. Up to a dozen persons lived inside a cabin, sleeping in straw on the bare ground, sharing the place with the family's pig and chickens. In some cases, mud cabin occupants were actually the dispossessed descendants of Irish estate owners. It was not uncommon for a beggar in Ireland to mention that he was in fact the descendant of an ancient Irish king.

Most of the Irish countryside was owned by an English and Anglo-Irish hereditary ruling class. Many were absentee landlords that set foot on their properties once or twice a year, if at all. Mainly Protestant, they held titles to enormous tracts of land long ago confiscated from native Irish Catholics by British conquerors such as Oliver Cromwell. The landlords often utilized local agents to actually manage their estates while living lavishly in London or in Europe off the rents paid by Catholics for land their ancestors had once owned.

Throughout Ireland, Protestants known as middlemen rented large amounts of land on the various estates then sub-divided the land into smaller holdings which they rented to poor Catholic farmers. The middleman system began in the 1700s and became a major source of misery as they kept sub-dividing estates into smaller and smaller parcels while increasing the rent every year in a practice known as rack-renting.

The average tenant farmer lived at a subsistence level on less than ten acres. These Catholic farmers were usually considered tenants-at-will and could be evicted on short notice at the whim of the landlord, his agent, or middleman. By law, any improvements they made, such as building a stone house, became the property of the landlord. Thus there was never any incentive to upgrade their living conditions.

The tenant farmers often allowed landless laborers, known as cottiers, to live on their farms. The cottiers performed daily chores and helped bring in the annual harvest as payment of rent. In return, they were allowed to build a small cabin and keep their own potato garden to feed their families. Other landless laborers rented small fertilized potato plots from farmers as conacre, with a portion of their potato harvest given up as payment of rent. Poor Irish laborers, more than anyone, became totally dependent on the potato for their existence. They also lived in a state of permanent insecurity with the possibility always looming they might be thrown off their plot.



The most fertile farmland was found in the north and east of Ireland. The more heavily populated south and west featured large wet areas (bog) and rocky soil. Mountains and bogs cover about a third of Ireland. By the mid-1800s, the density of Irish living on cultivated land was about 700 people per square mile, among the highest rate in Europe.

Potatoes are not native to Ireland but likely originated in the Andes Mountains of Peru, South America. In the early 1500s, Spanish conquerors found the Incas growing the vegetable, which the Spanish called patata. They were taken back to Europe and eventually reached England where the name changed to potato. About 1590, potatoes were introduced to Ireland where farmers quickly discovered they thrived in their country's cool moist soil with very little labor. An acre of fertilized potato field could yield up to 12 tons of potatoes, enough to feed a family of six for a year with leftovers going to the family's animals.

By the 1800s, the potato had become the staple crop in the poorest regions. More than three million Irish peasants subsisted solely on the vegetable which is rich in protein, carbohydrates, minerals, and vitamins such as riboflavin, niacin and Vitamin C. It is possible to stay healthy on a diet of potatoes alone. The Irish often drank a little buttermilk with their meal and sometimes used salt, cabbage, and fish as seasoning. Irish peasants were actually healthier than peasants in England or Europe where bread, far less nutritious, was the staple food.

Irish farmers utilized an ancient 'lazy bed' planting technique. Using a simple spade, they first marked long parallel lines in the soil about four feet apart throughout the entire plot. In between the lines, they piled a mixture of manure and crushed seashells then turned over the surrounding sod onto this, leaving the grass turned upside down. Seed potatoes were inserted in-between the overturned grass and the layer of fertilizer then buried with dirt dug-up along the marked lines. The potato bed was thus raised about a foot off the surrounding ground, with good drainage provided via the newly dug parallel trenches.

Planting occurred in the spring beginning around St. Patrick's Day. Most of the poor Irish grew a variety known as Lumpers, a high yielding, but less nutritious potato that didn't mature until September or October. Every year for the poor, July and August were the hungry months as the previous year's crop became inedible and the current crop wasn't quite ready for harvest. This was the yearly 'summer hunger,' also called 'meal months,' referring to oat or barley meal bought from price gauging dealers out of necessity. During the summer hunger, women and children from the poorest families resorted to begging along the roadside while the men sought temporary work in the harvest fields of England.

By autumn, the potatoes were ready to be harvested, carefully stored in pits, and eaten during the long winter into the spring and early summer. The Irish consumed an estimated seven million tons in this way each year. The system worked year after year and the people were sustained as long as the potato crop didn't fail.

Before the Famine

In 1798, inspired by the American and French revolutions, the Irish staged a major rebellion against British rule. Widespread hangings and floggings soon followed as the rebellion was brutally squashed. The English Army in Ireland was also increased to nearly 100,000 men.

Two years later, the British Act of Union made Ireland a part of the United Kingdom. The Act abolished the 500-year-old independent Irish Parliament in Dublin and placed the country under the jurisdiction of Britain's Imperial Parliament at Westminster, England. Although Ireland was to be represented there by 100 members, Catholics were excluded.

Anti-Catholic prohibitions dated back to 1695 when the British began imposing a series of Penal Laws designed to punish the Irish for supporting the Catholic Stuart King, James II, in his battle to ascend the British throne in

place of the Protestant, William of Orange. With an Irish Catholic army at his side, James II had been defeated at the Battle of the Boyne in July 1690. The resulting Penal Laws stripped Irish Catholics of their rights including; the ability to serve as an officer in the British Army or Navy, hold any government office, vote, buy land, practice law, attend school, serve an apprenticeship, possess weapons, and practice their religion. The Catholic Church was outlawed. The Gaelic language was banned. Export trade was forbidden as Irish commerce and industry were deliberately destroyed.

With 80 percent of Ireland being Catholic, the Penal Laws were intended to degrade the Irish so severely that they would never again be in a position to seriously threaten Protestant rule. In 1600, Protestants had owned just 10 percent of Ireland's land. By 1778, Protestants owned 95 percent of the land. When a Catholic landowner died, the estate was divided up equally among all of his sons, diluting the value. However, if any son renounced Catholicism and became a Protestant, he automatically inherited all of his father's property.

Various Penal Laws remained in effect for 140 years until Catholic Emancipation occurred in 1829, largely through the efforts of Daniel O'Connell, a brilliant Catholic lawyer from County Kerry. But by the time of Emancipation, Ireland had become a nation laid low.

The French sociologist, Gustave de Beaumont, visited Ireland in 1835 and wrote: "I have seen the Indian in his forests, and the Negro in his chains, and thought, as I contemplated their pitiable condition, that I saw the very extreme of human wretchedness; but I did not then know the condition of unfortunate Ireland...In all countries, more or less, paupers may be discovered; but an entire nation of paupers is what was never seen until it was shown in Ireland."

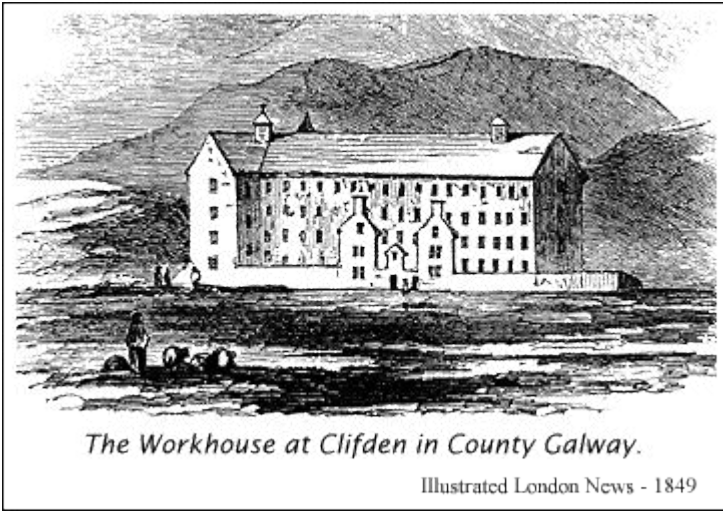
By the mid-1800s, many high-minded English politicians and social reformers began to think that Ireland was a nation in need of transformation, that its people now needed to be yanked into the modern world by tossing out the old Gaelic traditions. To the industrious, ambitious British, their rural Irish neighbors seemed to be an alien, rebellious, backward people, stuck in an ancient agrarian past. English reformers hoped to remake the Irish in their own image, thus ending Ireland's cycle of poverty and misfortune in an era when poverty was thought to be caused by bad moral character. The laid-back, communal lifestyle of Irish peasants with their long periods of idleness was also an affront to influential Protestants in England who believed idleness was the devil's work. They professed the virtues of hard work, thrift and self-reliance and regarded the Irish as totally lacking in these qualities, a point of view also shared by many British officials and politicians.

English reformers watched in dismay as Ireland's 'surplus' population doubled to over 8 million before the Famine. Bountiful harvests meant the people were generally well fed but there were very few employment opportunities. The Act of Union had resulted in Ireland's economy being absorbed by Britain. Although free trade now existed between the two countries, England generally used Ireland as a dumping ground for its surplus goods. Rapid industrialization in Britain also brought the collapse of the Irish linen and woolen industries in the countryside with their less efficient handlooms. The British 'Poor Enquiry' survey conducted in 1835, revealed that 75 percent of Irish laborers were without any regular work and that begging was very common.



The British government, under pressure from English reformers to relieve the situation, enacted the Poor Law Act of 1838, modeled on the English workhouse system. Under this relief plan, Ireland was divided into 130 separate administrative areas, called unions, since they united several church parishes together. Each union had its own workhouse and a local Board of Guardians elected by taxpaying landowners and farmers. The chairman

of the Board was usually the biggest proprietor or landlord in the area. Each Board was responsible for setting local tax rates and for collecting the funds necessary to maintain the workhouse. Inside each workhouse lived a resident Master and Matron, who were also supervised by the Board. The entire system was supervised by a Poor Law Commissioner stationed in Dublin.



Upon arrival at a workhouse, the head of a pauper family would be harshly questioned to prove his family had no other way of surviving. Once admitted, families were immediately split up, had their old clothes removed, were washed down, then given workhouse uniforms. Men and women, boys and girls had their own living quarters and were permanently segregated. Workhouse residents were forbidden to leave the building. The ten-hour workday involved breaking of stones for men and knitting for the women. Little children were drilled in their daily school lessons while older children received factory-style industrial training. A bell tolled throughout the day signaling the start or end of various activities.

Strict rules included no use of bad language, no disobedience, no laziness, no talking during mealtime and prohibited any family reunions, except during Sunday church.

The 130 pre-famine workhouses throughout Ireland could hold a total of about 100,000 persons. Everyone knew that entering a workhouse meant the complete loss of dignity and freedom, thus poor people avoided them. Before the Famine, workhouses generally remained three-quarters empty despite the fact there were an estimated 2.4 million Irish living in a state of poverty.

Early Emigrants

Many adventurous, unemployed young Irishmen sought their fortunes in America and boarded ships heading for Boston, New York and Philadelphia. Emigrants during the 1700s were mostly Presbyterians from the north of Ireland, the so-called "Scotch-Irish." Some agreed to work as indentured servants without pay up to five years in return for free passage. By 1776, nearly 250,000 Irish Protestants had emigrated to North America.

Between 1815 and 1845, nearly a million Irish, including a large number of unemployed Catholics, came to the United States. The men went to work providing the backbreaking labor needed to build canals, roads and railways in the rapidly expanding country. Irish pick-and-shovel workers proved to be very hard-working and were in great demand. American contractors often placed advertisements in newspapers in Dublin, Cork and Belfast before beginning big construction projects. The massive Erie Canal project, for example, was built by scores of Irishmen working from dawn till dusk for a dollar-a-day, hand-digging their way westward through the rugged wilderness of upstate New York. The 363 mile-long canal became the main east-west commerce route and spurred America's early economic growth by drastically lowering the costs of getting goods to market.

Back home in Ireland, on the eve of the Famine, the spirit of rebellion had once again arisen. Led by the brilliant orator, Daniel O'Connell, growing numbers of Irish were demanding self-government for Ireland through repeal of the Act of Union. The Repeal Movement featured mass rallies filled with O'Connell's fiery oratory. At one such rally in County Meath, nearly 750,000 persons came together on the Hill of Tara, a former place of Irish kings.

The movement peaked in October 1843 as O'Connell and half-a-million supporters attempted to gather near Dublin for another 'monster' rally, but this time encountered British cannons, warships and troops ready for a violent confrontation. To avoid a potential massacre, O'Connell ordered his people to disperse. The British then arrested the 68-year-old O'Connell. While in prison his health broke and his Repeal Movement faded. He died just a few years later, leaving Ireland leaderless and without a charismatic voice during its darkest period.

The Blight Begins

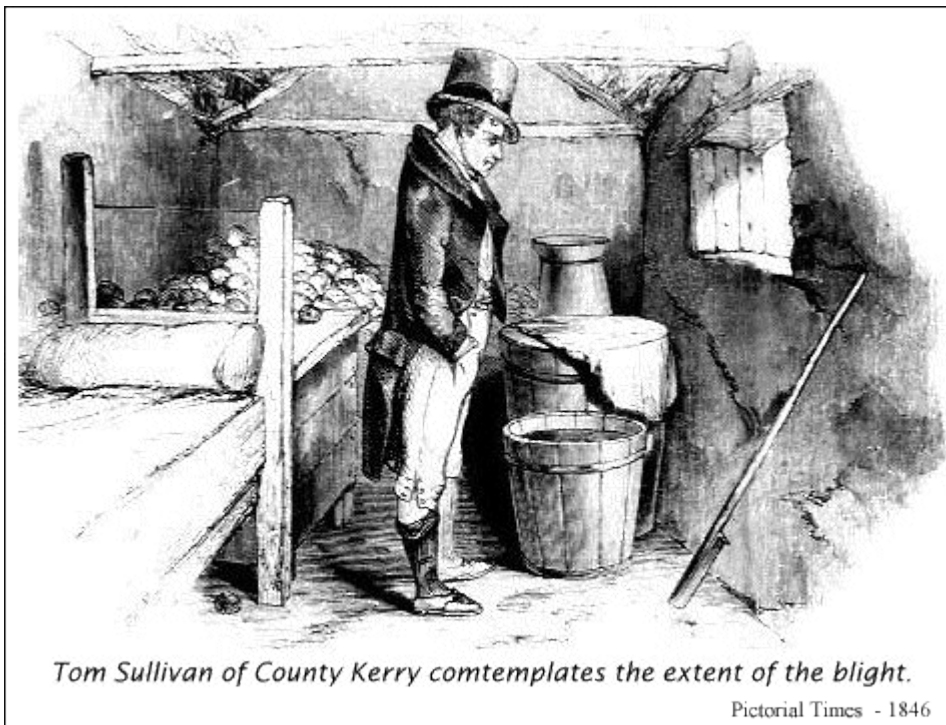
The Famine began quite mysteriously in September 1845 as leaves on potato plants suddenly turned black and curled, then rotted, seemingly the result of a fog that had wafted across the fields of Ireland. The cause was actually an airborne fungus (*phytophthora infestans*) originally transported in the holds of ships traveling from North America to England.

Winds from southern England carried the fungus to the countryside around Dublin. The blight spread throughout the fields as fungal spores settled on the leaves of healthy potato plants, multiplied and were carried in the millions by cool breezes to surrounding plants. Under ideal moist conditions, a single infected potato plant could infect thousands more in just a few days.

The attacked plants fermented while providing the nourishment the fungus needed to live, emitting a nauseous stench as they blackened and withered in front of the disbelieving eyes of Irish peasants. There had been crop failures in the past due to weather and other diseases, but this strange new failure was unlike anything ever seen. Potatoes dug out of the ground at first looked edible, but shriveled and rotted within days. The potatoes had been attacked by the same fungus that had destroyed the plant leaves above ground.

By October 1845, news of the blight had reached London. British Prime Minister, Sir Robert Peel, quickly established a Scientific Commission to examine the problem. After briefly studying the situation, the Commission issued a gloomy report that over half of Ireland's potato crop might perish due to 'wet rot.'

Meanwhile, the people of Ireland formulated their own unscientific theories on the cause of the blight. Perhaps,



Tom Sullivan of County Kerry contemplates the extent of the blight.

Pictorial Times - 1846

it was thought, static electricity in the air resulting from the newly arrived locomotive trains caused it. Others reasoned that 'mortiferous vapors' from volcanoes emanating from the center of the earth might have done it. Some Catholics viewed the crisis in religious terms as Divine punishment for the "sins of the people" while others saw it as Judgment against abusive landlords and middlemen.

In England, religious-minded social reformers viewed the blight as a heaven-sent 'blessing' that would finally provide an opportunity to transform Ireland, ending the cycle of poverty resulting from the people's mistaken dependence on the potato.

With the threat of starvation looming, Prime Minister Peel made a courageous political decision to advocate repeal of England's long-standing Corn Laws. The protectionist laws had been enacted in 1815 to artificially keep up the price of British-grown grain by imposing heavy tariffs on all imported grain. Under the Corn Laws, the large amounts of cheap foreign grain now needed for Ireland would be prohibitively expensive. However, English gentry and politicians reacted with outrage at the mere prospect of losing their long-cherished price protections. The political furor in Britain surrounding Peel's decision quickly overshadowed any concern for the consequences of the crop failure in Ireland.

Ireland's potato crop failures in the past had always been regional and short-lived with modest loss of life. Between 1800 and 1845, sixteen food shortages had occurred in various parts of Ireland. However, during the Famine the crop failure became national for the first time, affecting the entire country at once. British officials believed the 1845 food shortage would likely end with next year's harvest. Thus they reacted to the current food shortage as they had in the past by enacting temporary relief measures.

A Relief Commission was established in Dublin to set up local relief committees throughout Ireland composed of landowners, their agents, magistrates, clergy and notable residents. The local committees were supposed to help organize employment projects and distribute food to the poor while raising money from landowners to cover part of the cost. The British government would then contribute a matching amount.

However, in remote rural areas, many of the relief committees were taken over by poorly educated farmers who conducted disorganized, rowdy meetings. Local landowners, upon seeing who was on the committees, balked at donating any money. There were also a high number of absentee landlords in the remote western areas with little first-hand knowledge of what was occurring on their property. They also failed to donate.

Trevelyan Takes Over

The shaky Irish relief effort soon came under the control of a 38-year-old English civil servant named Charles Edward Trevelyan, Assistant Secretary of the British Treasury. Trevelyan was appointed by Prime Minister Peel to oversee relief operations in Ireland and would become the single most important British administrator during the Famine years. He was a brilliant young man of unimpeachable integrity but was also stubborn, self-righteous, overly bureaucratic, and not given to a favorable opinion of the Irish.

Unwilling to delegate any authority in his day-to-day duties, he managed every detail, no matter how small. All communications arriving from his administrators in Ireland were handed directly to him, unseen by anyone else. Important decisions were thus delayed as his workload steadily increased. He often remained at his office until 3 a.m. and demanded the same kind of round-the-clock commitment from his subordinates.

Trevelyan would visit Ireland just once during all of the Famine years, venturing only as far as Dublin, far from the hard-hit west of Ireland. Remoteness from the suffering, he once stated, kept his judgment more acute than that of his administrators actually working among the people affected.

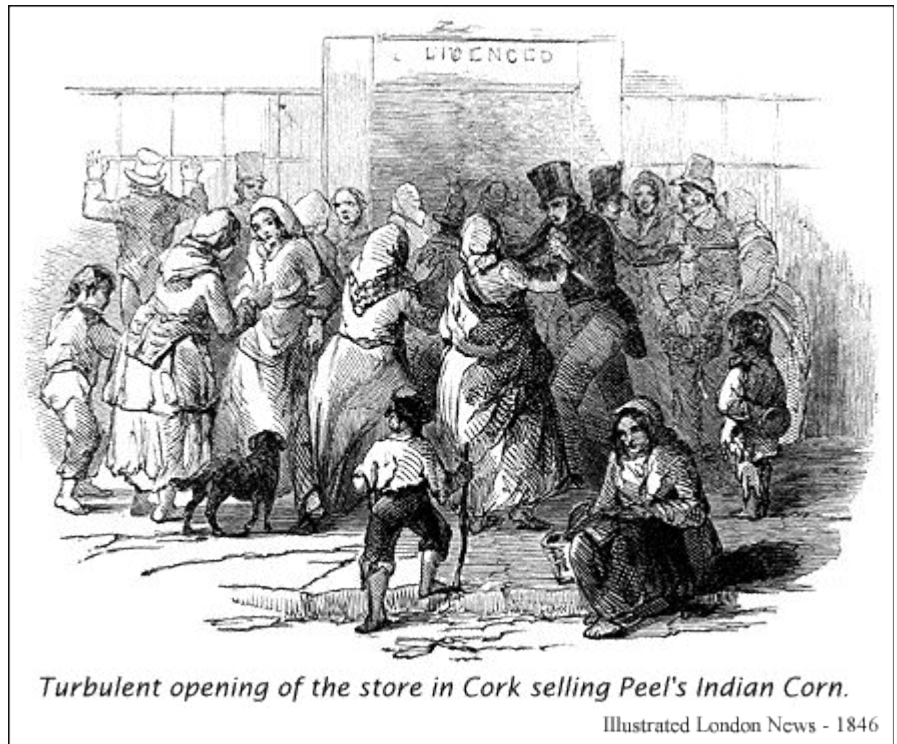
In the spring of 1846, under his control, the British attempted to implement a large-scale public works program for Ireland's unemployed. Similar temporary programs had been successfully used in the past. But this time, Trevelyan complicated the process via new bureaucratic procedures that were supposed to be administered by a Board of Works located in Dublin. The understaffed Board was quickly swamped with work requests from landowners. At the same time, local relief committees were besieged by masses of unemployed men. The result was confusion and anger. British troops had to be called in to quell several disturbances.

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Peel came up with his own solution to the food problem. Without informing his own Conservative (Tory) government, he secretly purchased two shipments of inexpensive Indian corn (maize) directly from America to be distributed to the Irish. But problems arose as soon as the maize arrived in Ireland.

It needed to be ground into digestible corn meal and there weren't enough mills available amid a nation of potato farmers. Mills that did process the maize discovered the pebble-like grain had to be ground twice.

To distribute the corn meal, a practical, business-like plan was developed in which the Relief Commission sold the meal at cost to local relief committees which in turn sold it at cost to the Irish at just one penny per pound. But peasants soon ran out of money and most landowners failed to contribute any money to maintain the relief effort.

The corn meal itself also caused problems. Normally, the Irish ate enormous meals of boiled potatoes three times a day. A working man might eat up to fourteen pounds each day. They found Indian corn to be an unsatisfying substitute. Peasants nicknamed the bright yellow substance 'Peel's brimstone.' It was difficult to cook, hard to digest and caused diarrhea. Most of all, it lacked the belly-filling bulk of the potato. It also lacked Vitamin C and resulted in scurvy, a condition previously unknown in Ireland due to the normal consumption of potatoes rich in Vitamin C.



Out of necessity, the Irish grew accustomed to the corn meal. But by June 1846 supplies were exhausted. The Relief Commission estimated that four million Irish would need to be fed during the spring and summer of 1846, since nearly £3 million worth of potatoes had been lost in the first year of the Famine. But Peel had imported only about £100,000 worth of Indian corn from America and Trevelyan made no effort to replenish the limited supply.

Laissez-Faire

In deciding their course of action during the Famine, British government officials and administrators rigidly adhered to the popular theory of the day, known as laissez-faire (meaning let it be), which advocated a hands-off policy in the belief that all problems would eventually be solved on their own through 'natural means.'

Great efforts were thus made to sidestep social problems and avoid any interference with private enterprise or the rights of property owners. Throughout the entire Famine period, the British government would never provide massive food aid to Ireland under the assumption that English landowners and private businesses would have been unfairly harmed by resulting food price fluctuations.

In adhering to laissez-faire, the British government also did not interfere with the English-controlled export business in Irish-grown grains. Throughout the Famine years, large quantities of native-grown wheat, barley, oats and oatmeal sailed out of places such as Limerick and Waterford for England, even though local Irish were dying of starvation. Irish farmers, desperate for cash, routinely sold the grain to the British in order to pay the rent on their farms and thus avoid eviction.

In the first year of the Famine, deaths from starvation were kept down due to the imports of Indian corn and survival of about half the original potato crop. Poor Irish survived the first year by selling off their livestock and pawning their meager possessions whenever necessary to buy food. Some borrowed money at high interest from petty money-lenders, known as gombeen men. They also fell behind on their rents.

The potato crop in Ireland had never failed for two consecutive years. Everyone was counting on the next harvest to be blight-free. But the blight was here to stay and three of the following four years would be potato crop disasters, with catastrophic consequences for Ireland.

The Great Hunger

On June 29, 1846, the resignation of British Prime Minister Sir Robert Peel was announced. Peel's Conservative government had fallen over political fallout from repeal of the Corn Laws which he had forced through Parliament. His departure paved the way for Charles Trevelyan to take full control of Famine policy under the new Liberal government. The Liberals, known as Whigs in those days, were led by Lord John Russell, and were big believers in the principle of laissez-faire.

Once he had firmly taken control, Trevelyan ordered the closing of the food depots in Ireland that had been selling Peel's Indian corn. He also rejected another boatload of Indian corn already headed for Ireland. His reasoning, as he explained in a letter, was to prevent the Irish from becoming "habitually dependent" on the British government. His openly stated desire was to make "Irish property support Irish poverty."

As a devout advocate of laissez-faire, Trevelyan also claimed that aiding the Irish brought "the risk of paralyzing all private enterprise." Thus he ruled out providing any more government food, despite early reports the potato blight had already been spotted amid the next harvest in the west of Ireland. Trevelyan believed Peel's policy of providing cheap Indian corn meal to the Irish had been a mistake because it undercut market prices and had discouraged private food dealers from importing the needed food. This year, the British government would do nothing. The food depots would be closed on schedule and the Irish fed via the free market, reducing their dependence on the government while at the same time maintaining the rights of private enterprise.

Throughout the summer of 1846, the people of Ireland had high hopes for a good potato harvest. But the cool moist summer weather had been ideal for the spread of blight. Diseased potatoes from the previous harvest had also been used as planters and sprouted diseased shoots. At first, the crop appeared healthy. But by harvest time the blight struck ferociously, spreading fifty miles per week across the countryside, destroying nearly every potato in Ireland.

A Catholic priest named Father Matthew wrote to Trevelyan: "In many places the wretched people were seated on the fences of their decaying gardens, wringing their hands and wailing bitterly the destruction that had left them foodless."

There were only enough potatoes to feed the Irish population for a single month. Panic swept the country. Local relief committees were once again besieged by mobs of unemployed demanding jobs on public works projects. The Irish Board of Works was once again swamped with work proposals from landlords.

Trevelyan's free market relief plan depended on private merchants supplying food to peasants who were earning wages through public works employment financed mainly by the Irish themselves through local taxes. But the problems with this plan were numerous. Tax revenues were insufficient. Wages had been set too low. Paydays were irregular and those who did get work could not afford to both pay their rent and buy food. Ireland also

lacked adequate transportation for efficient food distribution. There were only 70 miles of railroad track in the whole country and no usable commercial shipping docks in the western districts.

By September, starvation struck in the west and southwest where the people had been entirely dependent on the potato. British Coastguard Inspector-General, Sir James Dombrain, upon encountering starving paupers, ordered his subordinates to give free food handouts. For his efforts, Dombrain was publicly rebuked by Trevelyan. The proper procedure, he was informed, would have been to encourage the Irish to form a local relief committee so that Irish funds could have been raised to provide the food.

"There was no one within many miles who could have contributed one shilling...The people were actually dying," Dombrain responded.

Many of the rural Irish had little knowledge of money, preferring to live by the old barter system, trading goods and labor for whatever they needed. Any relief plan requiring them to purchase food was bound to fail. In areas where people actually had a little money, they couldn't find a single loaf of bread or ounce of corn meal for sale. Food supplies in 1846 were very tight throughout all of Europe, severely reducing imports into England and Ireland. European countries such as France and Belgium outbid Britain for food from the Mediterranean and even for Indian corn from America.



Meanwhile, the Irish watched with increasing anger as boatloads of home-grown oats and grain departed on schedule from their shores for shipment to England. Food riots erupted in ports such as Youghal near Cork where peasants tried unsuccessfully to confiscate a boatload of oats. At Dungarvan in County Waterford, British troops were pelted with stones and fired 26 shots into the crowd, killing two peasants and wounding several others. British naval escorts were then provided for the riverboats as they passed before the starving eyes of peasants watching on shore.

As the Famine worsened, the British continually sent in more troops. "Would to God the Government would send us food instead of soldiers," a starving inhabitant of County Mayo lamented.

The Irish in the countryside began to live off wild blackberries, ate nettles, turnips, old cabbage leaves, edible seaweed, shellfish, roots, roadside weeds and even green grass. They sold their livestock and pawned everything they owned including their clothing to pay the rent to avoid certain eviction and then bought what little food they could find with any leftover money. As food prices steadily rose, parents were forced to listen to the endless crying of malnourished children.

Fish, although plentiful along the West Coast of Ireland, remained out of reach in water too deep and dangerous for the little cowhide-covered Irish fishing boats, known as currachs. Starving fishermen also pawned their nets and tackle to buy food for their families.

Making matters worse, the winter of 1846-47 became the worst in living memory as one blizzard after another buried homes in snow up to their roofs. The Irish climate is normally mild and entire winters often pass without snow. But this year, an abrupt change in the prevailing winds from southwest into the northeast brought bitter cold gales of snow, sleet and hail.

Black Forty-Seven

Amid the bleak winter, hundreds of thousands of desperate Irish sought work on public works relief projects. By late December 1846, 500,000 men, women and children were at work building stone roads. Paid by piece-work, the men broke apart large stones with hammers then placed the fragments in baskets carried by the women to the road site where they were dumped and fit into place. They built roads that went from nowhere to nowhere in remote rural areas that had no need of such roads in the first place. Many of the workers, poorly clothed, malnourished and weakened by fever, fainted or even dropped dead on the spot.

The men were unable to earn enough money to adequately feed themselves let alone their families as food prices continued to climb. Corn meal now sold for three pennies a pound, three times what it had been a year earlier. As a result, children sometimes went unfed so that parents could stay healthy enough to keep working for the desperately needed cash.

A first-hand investigation of the overall situation was conducted by William Forster, a member of the Quaker community in England. He was acting on behalf of the recently formed Central Relief Committee of the Society of Friends, with branches in Dublin and London. The children, Forster observed, had become "like skeletons, their features sharpened with hunger and their limbs wasted, so that little was left but bones, their hands and arms, in particular, being much emaciated, and the happy expression of infancy gone from their faces, leaving behind the anxious look of premature old age."

Nicholas Cummins, the magistrate of Cork, visited the hard-hit coastal district of Skibbereen. "I entered some of the hovels," he wrote, "and the scenes which presented themselves were such as no tongue or pen can convey the slightest idea of. In the first, six famished and ghastly skeletons, to all appearances dead, were huddled in a corner on some filthy straw, their sole covering what seemed a ragged horsecloth, their wretched legs hanging about, naked above the knees. I approached with horror, and found by a low moaning they were alive -- they were in fever, four children, a woman and what had once been a man. It is impossible to go through the detail. Suffice it to say, that in a few minutes I was surrounded by at least 200 such phantoms, such frightful spectres as no words can describe, [suffering] either from famine or from fever. Their demoniac yells are still ringing in my ears, and their horrible images are fixed upon my brain."

The dead were buried without coffins just a few inches below the soil, to be gnawed at by rats and dogs. In some cabins, the dead remained for days or weeks among the living who were too weak to move the bodies outside. In other places, unmarked hillside graves came into use as big trenches were dug and bodies dumped in, then covered with quicklime.

Most died not from hunger but from associated diseases such as typhus, dysentery, relapsing fever, and famine dropsy, in an era when doctors were unable to provide any cure. Highly contagious 'Black Fever,' as typhus was nicknamed since it blackened the skin, is spread by body lice and was carried from town to town by beggars and homeless paupers. Numerous doctors, priests, nuns, and kind-hearted persons who attended to the sick in their lice-infested dwellings also succumbed. Rural Irish, known for their hospitality and kindness to strangers, never refused to let a beggar or homeless family spend the night and often unknowingly contracted typhus. At times, entire homeless families, ravaged by fever, simply laid down along the roadside and died, succumbing to 'Road Fever.'



Soup Kitchens

Trevelyan's public works relief plan for Ireland had failed. At its peak, in February and March of 1847, some 700,000 Irish toiled about in useless projects while never earning enough money to halt starvation.

Now, in Cork harbor, the long-awaited private enterprise shipments of Indian corn and other food supplies had finally begun arriving. Food prices dropped by half and later dropped to a third of what they had been, but the penniless Irish still could not afford to eat. As a result, food accumulated in warehouses within sight of people walking about the streets starving.

Between March and June of 1847, the British government gradually shut down all of the public works projects throughout Ireland. The government, under the direction of Prime Minister Russell, had decided on an abrupt change of policy "to keep the people alive." The starving Irish were now to be fed for free through soup kitchens sponsored by local relief committees and by groups such as the Quakers and the British Relief Association, a private charity funded by prosperous English merchants.

The Soup Kitchen Act of 1847 called for the food to be provided through taxes collected by local relief committees from Irish landowners and merchants. But little money was ever forthcoming. Ireland was slowly going bankrupt. Landlords, many of whom were already heavily in debt with big mortgages and unpaid loans, were not receiving rents from their cash-strapped tenants. Merchants also went broke, closed up their shops, then joined the ranks of the dispossessed, begging on the streets.

Daily soup demand quickly exceeded the limited supply available. In Killarney, there was just one soup kitchen for 10,000 persons. Cheap soup recipes were improvised containing stomach-turning combinations of old meat, vegetables, and Indian corn all boiled together in water. To a people already suffering from dysentery, the watery stew could be a serious health risk. Many refused to eat the "vile" soup after just one serving, complaining of severe bowel problems. Another dislike was the requirement for every man woman and child to stand in line while holding a small pot or bowl to receive their daily serving, an affront to their pride.

By the spring, Government-sponsored soup kitchens were established throughout the countryside and began dispensing 'stirabout,' a more substantial porridge made from two-thirds Indian corn meal and one-third rice, cooked with water. By the summer, three million Irish were being kept alive on a pound of stirabout and a four-ounce slice of bread each day. But the meager rations were not enough to prevent malnutrition. Many adults slowly starved on this diet.

In the fall of 1847, the third potato harvest during the Famine brought in a blight-free crop but not enough potatoes had been planted back in the spring to sustain the people. The yield was only a quarter of the normal amount. Seed potatoes, many having been eaten, had been in short supply. Planters had either been involved in the public works projects or had been too ill to dig. Others were simply discouraged, knowing that whatever they grew would be seized by landowners, agents or middlemen as back payment for rent. The rough winter had also continued to wreak havoc into March and April with sleet, snow, and heavy winds, further delaying planting. Seed for alternative crops such as cabbage, peas and beans, had been too expensive for small farmers and laborers to buy.

Many landlords, desperate for cash income, now wanted to grow wheat or graze cattle and sheep on their estates. But they were prevented from doing so by the scores of tiny potato plots and dilapidated huts belonging to penniless tenants who had not paid rent for months, if not years. To save their estates from ruin, the paupers would simply have to go.

During the Famine period, an estimated half-million Irish were evicted from their cottages. Unscrupulous landlords used two methods to remove their penniless tenants. The first involved applying for a legal judgment against the male head of a family owing back-rent. After the local barrister pronounced judgment, the man would be thrown in jail and his wife and children dumped out on the streets. A 'notice to appear' was usually enough to cause most pauper families to flee and they were handed out by the hundreds.

The second method was for the landlord to simply pay to send pauper families overseas to British North America. Landlords would first make phony promises of money, food and clothing, then pack the half-naked people in overcrowded British sailing ships, poorly built and often unseaworthy, that became known as coffin ships.

The first coffin ships headed for Quebec, Canada. The three thousand mile journey, depending on winds and the captain's skill, could take from 40 days to three months. Upon arrival in the Saint Lawrence River, the ships were supposed to be inspected for disease and any sick passengers removed to quarantine facilities on Grosse Isle, a small island thirty miles downstream from Quebec City.

But in the spring of 1847, shipload after shipload of fevered Irish arrived, quickly overwhelming the small medical inspection facility, which only had 150 beds. By June, 40 vessels containing 14,000 Irish immigrants waited in a line extending two miles down the St. Lawrence. It took up to five days to see a doctor, many of whom were becoming ill from contact with the typhus-infected passengers. By the summer, the line of ships had grown several miles long. A fifteen-day general quarantine was then imposed for all of the waiting ships. Many healthy Irish thus succumbed to typhus as they were forced to remain in their lice-infested holds. With so many dead on board the waiting ships, hundreds of bodies were simply dumped overboard into the St. Lawrence.

Others, half-alive, were placed in small boats and then deposited on the beach at Grosse Isle, left to crawl to the hospital on their hands and knees if they could manage. Thousands of Irish, ill with typhus and dysentery, eventually wound up in hastily constructed wooden fever sheds. These makeshift hospitals, badly understaffed and unsanitary, simply became places to die, with corpses piled "like cordwood" in nearby mass graves. Those who couldn't get into the hospital died along the roadsides. In one case, an orphaned Irish boy walking along the road with other boys sat down for a moment under a tree to rest and promptly died on the spot.

The quarantine efforts were soon abandoned and the Irish were sent on to their next destination without any medical inspection or treatment. From Grosse Isle, the Irish were given free passage up the St. Lawrence to Montreal and cities such as Kingston and Toronto. The crowded open-aired river barges used to transport them exposed the fair-skinned Irish to all-day-long summer sun causing many bad sunburns. At night, they laid down close to each other to ward off the chilly air, spreading more lice and fever.

Many pauper families had been told by their landlords that once they arrived in Canada, an agent would meet them and pay out between two and five pounds depending on the size of the family. But no agents were ever found. Promises of money, food and clothing had been utterly false. Landlords knew that once the paupers arrived in Canada there was virtually no way for them to ever return to Ireland and make a claim. Thus they had promised them anything just to get them out of the country.

Montreal received the biggest influx of Irish during this time. Many of those arriving were quite ill from typhus and long-term malnutrition. Montreal's limited medical facilities at Point St. Charles were quickly overwhelmed. Homeless Irish wandered the countryside begging for help as temperatures dropped and the frosty Canadian winter set in. But they were shunned everywhere by Canadians afraid of contracting fever.

Of the 100,000 Irish that sailed to British North America in 1847, an estimated one out of five died from disease and malnutrition, including over five thousand at Grosse Isle.

Up to half of the men that survived the journey to Canada walked across the border to begin their new lives in America. They had no desire to live under the Union Jack flag in sparsely populated British North America. They viewed the United States with its anti-British tradition and its bustling young cities as the true land of opportunity. Many left their families behind in Canada until they had a chance to establish themselves in the U.S.

Americans, unfortunately, not only had an anti-British tradition dating back to the Revolutionary era, but also had an anti-Catholic tradition dating back to the Puritan era. America in the 1840s was a nation of about 23 million inhabitants, mainly Protestant. Many of the Puritan descendants now viewed the growing influx of Roman Catholic Irish with increasing dismay.

One way to limit immigration was to make it more expensive to get to America. Ports along the eastern seaboard of the U.S. required a bond to be posted by the captain of a ship guaranteeing that his passengers would not become wards of the city. Passenger fares to the U.S. in 1847 were up to three times higher than fares to Canada. The British government intentionally kept fares to Quebec low to encourage the Irish to populate Canada and also to discourage them from emigrating to England.

Passenger Acts

American ships were held to higher standards than British ships by the U.S. Passenger Acts, a set of laws passed by Congress regulating the number of passengers ships coming to America could carry as well as their minimal accommodations. Congress reacted to the surge of Irish immigration by tightening the laws, reducing the number of passengers allowed per ship, thereby increasing fares. America, congressmen had complained, was becoming Europe's "poor house."

British shipping laws, by contrast, were lax. Ships of every shape and size sailed from Liverpool and other ports crammed full of people up to double each ship's capacity. In one case, an unseaworthy ship full of Irish sailed out of port then sank within sight of those on land who had just said farewell to the emigrants.

During the trans-Atlantic voyage, British ships were only required to supply 7 lbs. of food per week per passenger. Most passengers, it was assumed, would bring along their own food for the journey. But most of the poor Irish boarded ships with no food, depending entirely on the pound-a-day handout which amounted to starvation rations. Food on board was also haphazardly cooked in makeshift brick fireplaces and was often undercooked, causing upset stomachs and diarrhea.



Many of the passengers were already ill with typhus as they boarded the ships. Before boarding, they had been given the once-over by doctors on shore who usually rejected no one for the trip, even those seemingly on the verge of death. British ships were not required to carry doctors. Anyone that died during the sea voyage was simply dumped overboard, without any religious rites.

Belowdecks, hundreds of men, women and children huddled together in the dark on bare wooden floors with no ventilation, breathing a stench of vomit and the effects of diarrhea amid no sanitary facilities. On ships that actually had sleeping berths, there were no mattresses and the berths were never cleaned. Many sick persons remained in bare wooden bunks lying in their own filth for the entire voyage, too ill to get up.

Another big problem was the lack of good drinking water. Sometimes the water was stored in leaky old wooden casks, or in casks that previously stored wine, vinegar or chemicals which contaminated the water and caused dysentery. Many ships ran out of water long before reaching North America, making life especially miserable for fevered passengers suffering from burning thirsts. Some unscrupulous captains profited by selling large amounts of alcohol to the passengers, resulting in "totally depraved and corrupted" behavior among them.

Refuge in Britain

The poorest of the poor never made it to North America. They fled Irish estates out of fear of imprisonment then begged all the way to Dublin or other seaports on the East Coast of Ireland. Once there, they boarded steamers and crossed the Irish Sea to Liverpool, Glasgow, and South Wales. It was a short trip, just two or three hours and cost only a few shillings. Pauper families sometimes traveled for free as human ballast on empty coal ships. Others were given fare money by landlords hoping to get rid of them cheaply. Relief funds intended for the purchase of food were sometimes diverted to pay for the fares.

For many Irishmen, crossing the sea to England was a familiar journey since they regularly worked in the harvest fields of England as seasonal laborers. But for their wives and children, it was a jarring experience. Crewmen scorned and herded them like animals onto crammed decks until the boat was dangerously overloaded. In one case, a crowded steamer heading for Liverpool arrived with 72 dead aboard. The captain had ordered the hatches battened down during a storm at sea and they had all suffocated.

Despite the dangers, the Irish knew that once they landed on Britain's shores they would not starve to death. Unlike Ireland, food handouts were freely available throughout the country. The quality of the food was also superior to the meager rations handed out in Ireland's soup kitchens and workhouses.

The Irish first headed for Liverpool, a city with a pre-famine population of about 250,000, many of whom were unskilled laborers. During the first wave of famine emigration, from January to June of 1847, an estimated 300,000 destitute Irish arrived in Liverpool, overwhelming the city. The financial burden of feeding the Irish every day soon brought the city to the brink of ruin. Sections of the city featuring cheap lodging houses became jammed. Overflow crowds moved into musty cellars, condemned and abandoned buildings, or anywhere they could just lie down. Amid these densely packed, unsanitary conditions, typhus once again reared its ugly head and an epidemic followed, accompanied by an outbreak of dysentery.

The cheap lodging houses were also used by scores of Irish waiting to embark on ships heading for North America. Three out of four Irish sailing for North America departed from the seaport at Liverpool. Normally they had to sleep over for a night or two until their ship was ready to sail. Many of these emigrants contracted typhus in the rundown, lice-infested lodging houses, then boarded ships, only to spend weeks suffering from burning fever out at sea.

On June 21, 1847, the British government, intending to aid besieged Liverpool, passed a tough new law allowing local authorities to deport homeless Irish back to Ireland. Within days, the first boatloads of paupers were being returned to Dublin and Cork, then abandoned on the docks. Orders for removal were issued by the hundreds. About 15,000 Irish were dragged out of filthy cellars and lodging houses and sent home even if they were ill with fever.

By the fall of 1847, the numbers of Irish entering Liverpool had slowed considerably and the housing crisis abated. Glasgow, the second major port of entry, also resorted to deporting the Irish due to similar overcrowding and fever outbreaks. The Irish then headed into the Lowlands and Edinburgh where yet another fever outbreak occurred. Everyone feared fever and thus shunned the Irish no matter how much they pleaded for help. Working men also viewed them as rivals for unskilled jobs.

To avoid deportation, the Irish moved further into the interior of England, Scotland and Wales. But wherever they went they were unwelcome. For the unfortunate Irish deported back home, the worst was yet to come.

Financial Ruin

The sight of tens of thousands of emaciated, diseased, half-naked Irish roaming the British countryside had infuriated members of the British Parliament. Someone had to take the blame for this incredible misfortune that had now crossed the Irish Sea and come upon the shores of Britain.

The obvious choice was the landlords of Ireland. Many British politicians and officials, including Charles Trevelyan, had long held the view that landlords were to blame for Ireland's chronic misery due to their failure to manage their estates efficiently and unwillingness to provide responsible leadership. Parliament thus enacted the Irish Poor Law Extension Act, a measure that became law on June 8, 1847, and dumped the entire cost and responsibility of Famine relief directly upon Ireland's property owners.

The British now intended to wash their hands of the 'Irish problem' no matter what lay ahead. Trevelyan supported this measure in the belief that enforced financial self-sufficiency was the only hope for ever improving Ireland. But in reality, many of Ireland's estate owners were deeply in debt with little or no cash income and were teetering on the verge of bankruptcy. However, the new Poor Law would require them to raise an estimated £10 million in tax revenue to support Ireland's paupers, an impossible task.

By now there was a plentiful supply of food in Ireland available for purchase in local markets but no one had any money. There was no employment of any kind. Trevelyan's public works projects had been shut down. Factories and industry were sparse. Local agriculture had been utterly disrupted.

Now, as the summer of 1847 ended, soup kitchens were also being shut down according to schedule. The Soup Kitchen Act had only been a temporary measure, designed to maintain the Irish until the autumn harvest. But the harvest of 1847 was just a quarter of the normal size due to insufficient planting back in the spring. The three million Irish who had come to depend on soup for survival would now have to fend for themselves, with no food handouts, no money, no employment, owing back-rent, and weakened by long-term malnutrition and disease.

British Financial Troubles

Ireland was not the only country with serious money problems. In the fall of 1847, Great Britain experienced a crash due to bad investments by English speculators and the resulting impact on London's banks. Wheat and corn prices had skyrocketed in 1846 throughout Europe only to tumble by the middle of 1847 when supply far exceeded demand. British investors that speculated took huge losses.

At the same time, investors speculating in the topsy-turvy British railway industry were ruined as railway shares collapsed. Money became very tight as British banks refused further credit. Eleven banks failed outright. Over a hundred established business firms went bankrupt. Stock prices and commodities tumbled.

The British financial crisis meant there would be no money available to help Ireland during its greatest time of need. British officials, greatly preoccupied with their own domestic troubles, would now pay little attention to Ireland. However, there was one exception. Charles Trevelyan remained deeply interested in relief operations in Ireland and quite determined to enforce the Poor Law Extension Act.

The British wanted to make the idea of getting a free handout as unattractive as possible to able-bodied Irishmen, fearing they would overwhelm the inadequate relief system, especially in the hard-pressed areas of southwest Ireland. The new Poor Law thus designated workhouses as the only places where able-bodied men could obtain relief, but only after surrendering all other means of support.

Anyone holding over a quarter-acre of land was required to forfeit their land before seeking relief. As a result, countless farm families with small holdings were forced into a life-and-death decision over whether to stay on their land and possibly starve or to give up their farm, surrender their dignity, and head for the workhouse as destitute paupers.

Workhouses were sparse in remote areas of Ireland and those that existed there were already occupied by widows, children, and the elderly. Trevelyan's idea was for these people to be ejected from the workhouses to make way for the men. But many local officials in Ireland were unwilling to do this.

To organize relief in Ireland, the British had divided the country into 130 separate areas (unions) with several parishes combined together to form a union. Each union was run by a Board of Guardians consisting of Irishmen responsible for setting local tax rates and collecting the revenue needed to provide aid to the people living within the union. But the plan encountered problems from the start due to the sheer size of most of the unions (100,000 or more acres) combined with the ever-increasing shortage of property owners financially able to pay taxes, especially in the hardest hit rural districts.

Wherever they were most needed, workhouses quickly slid into debt, ran short of supplies and turned people away in droves. Families in desolate areas resorted to living in small hovels cut out of the bog or dirt holes dug along the hillside. In Donegal Union, ten thousand persons were found living "in a state of degradation and filth which it is difficult to believe the most barbarous nations ever exceeded," according to the Quaker, William Forster. His organization, the Society of Friends, had refused to work in cooperation with the new Poor Law.

Ireland Turned Upside Down

By late 1847, most of the unions were heavily in debt with only a handful managing to collect the funds necessary to continue feeding local paupers. But rather than recognize the inherent problems with the new Poor Law, the British Government chose instead to exert maximum pressure on the Boards of Guardians in Ireland to collect their taxes "...by every available legal means and power of recovery..."

"Arrest, remand, do anything you can," Charles Wood, Chancellor of the Exchequer, instructed Lord Lieutenant Clarendon, the ranking British official in Ireland.

"Send horse, foot and dragoons, all the world will applaud you, and I should not be at all squeamish as to what I did, to the verge of the law and a little beyond."

Ireland was to be turned upside down to shake every last penny out of the pockets of property owners and former tax payers still listed on the rolls. Rate collectors seized livestock, furniture, or anything else of value including the clothes and tools of former tax payers who had become homeless paupers. By the end of the year, just under £1 million had been extracted from the Irish by such methods.

"The principle of the Poor Law," Trevelyan declared, "is that rate after rate should be levied, for the purpose of preserving life, until the landlord and the farmer either enable the people to support themselves by honest industry, or dispose of their estates to those who can perform this indispensable duty."

The new Poor Law also made landlords responsible for the taxes on small holdings on their estates occupied by peasant families and small farmers. To relieve themselves of this tax burden they evicted those tenants and broke up their little farms and villages, sometimes hiring local thugs who delighted in throwing out the people then smashing their cottages to bits with crowbars. British troops were also used when necessary, although many of the soldiers were reluctant to get involved in family evictions.

As winter approached, increasing numbers of evicted Irish families wandered the countryside in tattered rags with nowhere to sleep. Workhouses were already jammed. In the west of Ireland, people were now showing up by the hundreds at workhouse gates only to be turned away. As a temporary emergency measure, auxiliary workhouses were set up in unused warehouses, empty stores and other old buildings to provide shelter for an additional 150,000 persons. But they had no heat or sanitary facilities.

And soon they had no food. In strict adherence with the new Poor Law, unions that failed to raise the necessary taxes for food purchases were not helped by the British government as a matter of policy. Both inside and outside the workhouses of western Ireland, people began to starve on a scale approaching the previous ruinous winter. Anger and resentment grew in the countryside over the prospect that it was all going to happen again. The result was intense hatred for British authority, leading to unrest and anti-landlord violence.



Six landlords were shot and killed along with ten others involved in land management. Among those murdered was Denis Mahon of County Roscommon. He held the rank of major in a British cavalry regiment and had inherited the property of Strokestown shortly before the Famine. The property measured 9,000 acres and contained 28 little villages. After the failure of the potato, he had been one of the landlords paying to send unwanted tenants to Quebec. Over eight hundred tenants had thus vacated his estate. But there were still over three thousand paupers remaining in the villages and he proceeded to evict them all including 84 widows. For his actions, he was ambushed along the road by two Irishmen and shot dead. The people celebrated news of his death by lighting bonfires on the hills around his estate.

British officials were appalled. Fearful the violence might spread, they sent an additional fifteen thousand soldiers to Ireland and passed the Crime and Outrage Bill curtailing certain liberties in Ireland such as the carrying of firearms. The law also required Irishmen to assist in capturing suspected murderers. But despite these measures, many Anglo-Irish landowners and gentry fled the country, now fearing for their lives. Those who remained behind utilized heavy police protection.

Early in 1848, a group of Irish nationalists known as 'Young Ireland' decided the time was right for an armed uprising against the British. Members of Young Ireland had been greatly encouraged by recent political events in Europe. Popular uprisings in Paris, Sicily, Vienna, Milan and Venice, had resulted in long-despised governments falling and the flight of royalty. They hoped the same thing might now occur in Ireland.

But the British, with spies everywhere, quickly became aware of this and reacted by bringing in even more troops and by enacting yet another law curtailing liberty. The Treason Felony Act made speaking against the Crown or Parliament a crime punishable by transportation (to Botany Bay, Australia) for fourteen years or for life.

Throughout the spring into summer all kinds of wild rumors swept Ireland, mostly exaggerating the strength of the coming rebellion, but making the British increasingly nervous. More troops arrived and troublesome areas such as Dublin, Cork, and Waterford were placed under semi-martial law. Lord Lieutenant Clarendon, his nerves frayed, asked for and received permission in July to suspend the right of Habeas Corpus in Ireland lasting through March 1849. This meant anyone could be arrested and imprisoned indefinitely without formal charges or a trial.

But in reality the rebellion of 1848 never posed a serious threat. The Young Irelanders were not good planners or organizers. They failed to secure any firearms and most importantly could not provide food to the starving men of Ireland they were counting on to oppose the most powerful army in the world, presently encamped on their soil. Without weapons, food, or adequate planning, the movement to violently oust the British fizzled and by autumn had disintegrated entirely.

The Long Night of Sorrow

Though it might seem hard to imagine, things now got much worse for the Irish. In the fall of 1848, the blight returned in full and once again destroyed the entire potato crop. Weather conditions, cool and moist, had been ideal for the spread of fungus.

Massive amounts of potatoes had been planted all over Ireland. The people had sold off any remaining possessions or borrowed money to buy seed potatoes. Little attempt was made to grow any other crops. Everyone gambled that it would be a good potato harvest and that the old way of life would soon return. The blight had vanished in 1847 and there was just no reason to believe the harvest of 1848 wouldn't also be healthy.

But all over Ireland, the people watched in horror as their potato plants blackened and withered. Potatoes dug out of the ground rotted and stank until not a single good potato was left.

Now more than ever, the Irish would need to depend on the British for their very survival. But British officials were in no mood to help. The British were utterly flabbergasted the Irish had chosen once again to depend entirely on the potato after all that had happened. They also had deep anger over the failed insurrection and growing resentment toward a people they increasingly perceived as ungrateful.

For the Irish, the winter of 1848-49 would be the long night of sorrow as Trevelyan and the British Parliament enacted one harsh measure after another amid all of the suffering.

Landlords and gentry, now deeper in debt than ever, forcibly ejected remaining tenants then pulled down their houses to save on taxes. Eviction in winter usually meant death. The people, clothed in filthy rags, wandered aimlessly or headed in the general direction of the workhouse, often collapsing from fever and exposure long before getting there.

Reports of the conditions reached London, but there was little compassion for the Irish left in Britain. "In no other country," railed *The Times* of London, "have men talked treason until they are hoarse, and then gone about begging sympathy from their oppressors...and in none have they repeated more humble and piteous [requests for help] to those whom they have previously repaid with monstrous ingratitude."



Homeless family, the day after eviction.

Illustrated London News - 1848

An exasperated Prime Minister Russell now declared: "We have subscribed, worked, visited, clothed, for the Irish, millions of money, years of debate, etc., etc., etc. The only return is rebellion and calumny. Let us not grant, lend, clothe, etc., any more, and see what that will do..."

The Irish would continue to pay for their own relief without any help from the British treasury. Farmers and landlords, Trevelyan decided, would now be taxed at an increased rate to provide minimal relief to starving paupers. But the alarming news that there would be yet another tax increase, impossible for most to pay, simply ignited the desire among any remaining mid-sized farmers and proprietors to quit Ireland entirely and head for America.

By the beginning of 1849, the Irish were suffering on a scale similar to the worst months of 1846-47. Michael Shaughnessy, a barrister in Ireland, described children he encountered while traveling on his circuit as "almost naked, hair standing on end, eyes sunken, lips pallid, protruding bones of little joints visible." In another district, there was a report of a woman who had gone insane from hunger and eaten the flesh of her own dead children. In other places, people killed and ate dogs which themselves had been feeding off dead bodies.

Men and boys who had never been in trouble in their lives now deliberately committed crimes in order to be arrested and transported to Australia. "Even if I had chains on my legs, I would still have something to eat," said an Irish teenager after his arrest.

Of the 130 unions in Ireland, up to seventy were now on the verge of financial ruin due to insufficient tax revenues. Responding to this, Trevelyan decided that prosperous unions should be forced to provide funds to the distressed unions. This meant there would be a drain of money from the few remaining stable areas into ruined areas, breaking all of Ireland financially.

For the British, this served several purposes. It was a continuation of the punitive mentality toward the Irish; left Ireland entirely dependent upon itself for relief; and perhaps most importantly, a financially ruined Ireland would be compelled "to abandon the treacherous potato" once and for all. The long-awaited opportunity to reform Ireland had finally arrived.



The Village of Killard in Kilrush Union, County Clare.

Illustrated London News - 1849

But the plan also had the potential for catastrophic consequences, recognized by some of the British officials who spoke out, including Poor Law Commissioner Edward Twisleton who resigned his post in Ireland stating: "The destitution here is so horrible and the indifference of the House of Commons to it so manifest..."

Lord Lieutenant Clarendon also criticized the lack of government funds: "...it is enough to drive one mad, day after day, to read the appeals that are made and to meet them all with a negative...I don't think there is another legislature in Europe that would disregard such suffering as now exists in the west of Ireland..."

Fears began to surface within the British government of the Irish suddenly dropping dead by the tens of thousands and the possible impact such scenes might have upon world opinion of the Crown. In spite of this, nothing further was done, even after an outbreak of cholera ravaged the overflowing workhouses.

The Irish, for their part, were not about to simply sit still and die. The whole population of the starving country began to move about. Cities, villages and entire districts were abandoned. Western Ireland was nearly depleted of its population. Among country folk, the centuries-old communal way of life with its traditional emphasis on neighborly sharing, now collapsed. It was replaced by a survival mentality in which every family, every person fended for themselves. Family bonds also disintegrated as starving parents deserted their children and children likewise deserted their parents.

The potato disaster of 1848 had sparked a new exodus to America. By the tens of thousands, the Irish boarded ships and departed their beloved homeland, heading to Boston, New York, Charleston, Savannah, and New Orleans, arriving there in tattered clothes, sick from the voyage, disoriented, afraid, perhaps even terrified, but with a glimmer of hope.

Gone to America

Throughout the Famine years, nearly a million Irish arrived in the United States. Famine immigrants were the first big wave of poor refugees ever to arrive in the U.S. and Americans were simply overwhelmed. Upon arrival in America, the Irish found the going to be quite tough. With no one to help them, they immediately settled into the lowest rung of society and waged a daily battle for survival.

The roughest welcome of all would be in Boston, Massachusetts, an Anglo-Saxon city with a population of about 115,000. It was a place run by descendants of English Puritans, men who could proudly recite their lineage back to 1620 and the Mayflower ship. Now, some two hundred thirty years later, their city was undergoing nothing short of an unwanted "social revolution" as described by Ephraim Peabody, member of an old Yankee family. In 1847, the first big year of Famine emigration, the city was swamped with 37,000 Irish Catholics arriving by sea and land.

Proper Bostonians pointed and laughed at the first Irish immigrants stepping off ships wearing clothes twenty years out of fashion. They watched as the newly arrived Irishmen settled with their families into enclaves that became exclusively Irish near the Boston waterfront along Batterymarch and Broad Streets, then in the North End section and in East Boston. Irishmen took any unskilled jobs they could find such as cleaning yards and stables, unloading ships, and pushing carts.

And once again, they fell victim to unscrupulous landlords. This time it was Boston landlords who sub-divided former Yankee dwellings into cheap housing, charging Irish families up to \$1.50 a week to live in a single nine-by-eleven foot room with no water, sanitation, ventilation or daylight.

In Boston, as well as other American cities in the mid-1800s, there was no enforcement of sanitary regulations and no building or fire safety codes. Landlords could do as they pleased. A single family three-story house along the waterfront that once belonged to a prosperous Yankee merchant could be divided-up room by room into housing for a hundred Irish, bringing a nice profit.

The overflow Irish would settle into the gardens, back yards and alleys surrounding the house, living in wooden shacks. Demand for housing of any quality was extraordinary. People lived in musty cellars with low ceilings that partially flooded with every tide. Old warehouses and other buildings within the Irish enclave were hastily converted into rooming houses using flimsy wooden partitions that provided no privacy.

A Boston Committee of Internal Health studying the situation described the resulting Irish slum as "a perfect hive of human beings, without comforts and mostly without common necessities; in many cases huddled together like brutes, without regard to age or sex or sense of decency. Under such circumstances self-respect, forethought, all the high and noble virtues soon die out, and sullen indifference and despair or disorder, intemperance and utter degradation reign supreme."

The unsanitary conditions were breeding grounds for disease, particularly cholera. Sixty percent of the Irish children born in Boston during this period didn't live to see their sixth birthday. Adult Irish lived on average just six years after stepping off the boat onto American soil.

Those who were not ill were driven to despair. Rowdy behavior fueled by alcohol and boredom spilled out into the streets of Boston and the city witnessed a staggering increase in crime, up to 400 percent for such crimes as aggravated assault. Men and boys cooped up in tiny rooms and without employment or schooling got into serious trouble. An estimated 1500 children roamed the streets every day begging and making mischief.

There were only a limited number of unskilled jobs available. Intense rivalry quickly developed between the Irish and working class Bostonians over these jobs. In Ireland, a working man might earn eight cents a day. In America, he could earn up to a dollar a day, a tremendous improvement. Bostonians feared being undercut by hungry Irish willing to work for less than the going rate. Their resentment, combined with growing anti-Irish and anti-Catholic sentiment among all classes in Boston led to 'No Irish Need Apply' signs being posted in shop windows, factory gates and workshop doors throughout the city.

Irish in New York

New York, three times the size of Boston, was better able to absorb its incoming Irish. Throughout the Famine years, 75 percent of the Irish coming to America landed in New York. In 1847, about 52,000 Irish arrived in the city which had a total population of 372,000. The Irish were not the only big group of immigrants arriving. A substantial German population totaling over 53,000 also arrived in 1847.

In New York, the Irish did not face the degree of prejudice found in Boston. Instead, they were confronted by shifty characters and con artists. Confused Irish, fresh off the farm and suffering from culture shock, were taken advantage of the moment they set foot on shore.

Immediately upon arrival in New York harbor, they were met by Irishmen known as 'runners' speaking in Gaelic and promising to 'help' their fellow countrymen. Many of the new arrivals, quite frightened at the mere prospect of America, gladly accepted. Those who hesitated were usually bullied into submission. The runner's first con was to suggest a good place to stay in New York; a boarding house operated by a friend, supposedly with good meals and comfortable rooms at very affordable rates, including free storage of any luggage.

The boarding houses were actually filthy hell-holes in lower Manhattan. Instead of comfortable rooms, the confused arrivals were shoved into vermin-infested hovels with eight or ten other unfortunate souls, at prices three or four times higher than what they had been told. They remained as 'boarders' until their money ran out at which time their luggage was confiscated for back-rent and they were tossed out into the streets, homeless and penniless.

During the entire Famine period, about 650,000 Irish arrived in New York harbor. All incoming passenger ships to New York had to stop for medical inspection. Anyone with fever was removed to the quarantine station on Staten Island and the ship itself was quarantined for 30 days. But Staten Island was just five miles from Manhattan. Runners were so aggressive in pursuit of the Irish that they even rowed out to quarantined ships and sneaked into the hospitals on Staten Island despite the risk of contracting typhus.

Another way to take advantage of the Irish was to sell them phony railroad and boat tickets. Runners working with 'forwarding agents' sold bogus tickets that had pictures of trains or boats the illiterate immigrants wished to board to leave Manhattan for other U.S. cities. The tickets were either worthless, or if they were valid, had been sold at double the actual price or higher. On the boats, the immigrants were shoved into jam-packed steerage sections, although they thought they had paid for better accommodations. Sometimes, halfway to their destination, they were told to pay more or risk being thrown overboard.

The penniless Irish who remained in Manhattan stayed crowded together close to the docks where they sought work as unskilled dock workers. They found cheap housing wherever they could, with many families living in musty cellars. Abandoned houses near the waterfront that once belonged to wealthy merchants were converted into crowded tenements. Shoddy wooden tenements also sprang up overnight in yards and back alleys to be rented out room by room at high prices. Similar to Boston, New York experienced a high rate of infant mortality and a dramatic rise in crime as men and boys cooped-up in squalid shanties let off steam by drinking and getting in fights.

Anti-Irish Sentiment

U.S. immigration records indicate that by 1850, the Irish made up 43 percent of the foreign-born population. Up to ninety percent of the Irish arriving in America remained in cities. New York now had more Irish-born citizens than Dublin. Those who did not stay in New York or Boston traveled to places such as Albany, Cincinnati, Pittsburgh, Chicago, and out west to Butte, Montana, and San Francisco. Upon arrival, the Irishman and his family would usually go straight to the 'Irish quarter,' locate people from County Mayo, County Cork, or wherever they had come from, and settle in among them.

Unlike other nationalities that came to America seeking wide open spaces, the Irish chose to huddle in the cities partly because they were the poorest of all the immigrants arriving and partly out of a desire to recreate the close-knit communities they had cherished back in Ireland. Above all, the Irish loved each other's company, enjoying a daily dose of gossip, conversation, poetry and story telling, music and singing, and the ever-present jokes and puns.

But the daily pressures of living in America at the bottom rung of society also brought out the worst in them. Back home, the Irish were known for their honesty, law-abiding manners, and chastity. In America, old social norms disintegrated and many of the Irish, both men and women, behaved wildly. In the hopeless slums of New York, prostitution flourished and drunkenness occurred even among children.

Wherever they settled, the Irish kept to themselves to the exclusion of everyone else, and thus were slow to assimilate. Americans were thus slow to accept the Irish as equals, preferring instead to judge them by the cartoon stereotypes of drunken, brawling Irishmen published in newspapers of the day. Irish immigrants were also derided in the press as 'aliens' who were mindlessly loyal to their Catholic leaders in place of any allegiance to America.

The sheer numbers of Irish pouring into the U.S. meant that Catholicism was on the verge of becoming the single largest Christian denomination in America. Many American Protestants held the simplistic view that if the numbers of Roman Catholics were increasing then the power and influence of the Papacy in America was also increasing, threatening America's political independence. Fear of the Papacy thus became fear of the Irish and resulted in outright violence.

In Boston, a mob of Protestant workmen burned down a Catholic convent. Protestant mobs in Philadelphia rioted against Irish Catholics in 1844. The Irish in Philadelphia promptly gathered into mobs of their own and fought back, with the violence lasting over three days. Two Catholic churches were burned down along with hundreds of Irish homes and a dozen immigrants killed. In New York, Archbishop John Hughes, on hearing of

the Philadelphia attacks, deployed armed Irishmen to protect his own churches. Then he paid a visit to New York's mayor and warned him that if just one Catholic church was touched, the Irish would burn all of Manhattan to the ground. Other cities that experienced anti-Catholic violence included; Baltimore, St. Louis, New Orleans and Louisville, Kentucky.

Militant anti-Catholics formed a third political party nicknamed the 'Know-Nothings' seeking to curtail Irish immigration and keep them from becoming naturalized Americans in order to prevent them from ever gaining any political power. The movement was most successful in Massachusetts which elected Know-Nothing candidates to every statewide office in 1854, including governor. Throughout America, anti-Irish sentiment was becoming fashionable. Newspaper advertisements for jobs and housing in Boston, New York and other places now routinely ended with "Positively No Irish Need Apply."

But American concerns over Irish immigration soon took a back seat to the tremendous issue of slavery which was about to rip the young nation apart. For Irish Americans, the turning point of their early years in the U.S. would be the American Civil War. Over 140,000 enlisted in the Union army while others in the South enrolled in the Confederate ranks. Irish units, including the all-Irish 69th New York Regiment, participated in the monumental battles at Bull Run, Antietam, and Gettysburg, earning a reputation for dependability and bravery. At Fredericksburg, the 'Fighting 69th' repeatedly charged a well-entrenched Confederate position on Marye's Heights to the astonishment of all who observed.

However, during the Civil War, Irish civilians were heavily involved in the notorious New York draft riots in which African Americans were singled out for violence. Relations between Irish immigrants and African Americans in New York had never been good. From their earliest arrival in the U.S. the Irish had competed with freed slaves for the most menial jobs and cheapest housing. Decades of frustration and pent-up emotions finally erupted on the streets over three hot summer days in July 1863 resulting in numerous beatings and 18 blacks murdered. Federal troops from Gettysburg had to be called in to quell the violence. Hundreds of buildings, including a black orphanage, were destroyed along with \$5 million in property damage.

Rise of the Irish

Following the Civil War, Irish laborers once again provided the backbreaking work needed for the enormous expansion of rapidly industrializing America. They ran factories, built railroads in the West, and worked in the mines of Pennsylvania, Virginia and Montana. They were carpenter's assistants, boat-builders, dock-hands, bartenders and waiters. In an era when there were virtually no governmental constraints on American capitalism, the Irish organized the first trade unions and conducted strikes when necessary for higher wages, shorter hours, and safer working conditions.

Single Irish women found work as cooks and maids in houses belonging to wealthy families on Beacon Hill in Boston and along Fifth Avenue in New York, and in most other big cities. Many lived inside the homes in the servants' quarters and enjoyed a standard of living luxurious by comparison to the life they had known in Ireland or in the tenements. These women were cheerful, kind-hearted, hard working and thrifty, always managing to save a little money out of their salary for those back in Ireland. From 1850 to 1900 an



During the Civil War, members of New York's 'Fighting 69th' attend a battlefield Mass.



Members of the famous Irish Brigade of the Confederate Army.



In Boston, Irish clam diggers pose on a wharf, 1882.



In New York, officials investigate a squalid tenement, 1900.



Former presidential candidate Al Smith (on right) with Franklin Roosevelt, the man who followed him as governor of NY, 1930.



estimated \$260 million poured into Ireland from America, bringing over more family members and helping out those remaining behind.

The women also donated generously to their local Catholic parishes for new parochial schools and the construction of stained-glass churches with marble statues and altars. The beautiful cathedral-like buildings became great sources of pride among the Irish, making the statement that Catholics had 'arrived' in America. Catholic parishes became the center of family life, providing free education, hospitals, sports and numerous social activities, recreating to some degree the close-knit villages the Irish had loved back home while at the same time protecting them from unfriendly Americans.

Catholics in Ireland had endured centuries of discrimination at the hands of a dominant culture ruled by English and Anglo-Irish Protestants. They arrived in America only to find they were once again facing religious discrimination by the dominant culture; this time American Protestants. Eventually the Irish discovered the path to changing things in their new home lay in the local ballot box.

The large numbers of Irishmen now eligible to vote in cities such as New York and Boston meant they could no longer be politically ignored. The sons and grandsons of Famine immigrants joined the Democratic Party in droves, organized themselves by every ward and precinct into political 'machines' then became candidates for office, first getting elected to city councils, later to the mayor's office itself.

In Boston, newly elected Mayor James Michael Curley boldly announced in 1914: "The day of the Puritan has passed; the Anglo-Saxon is a joke; a new and better America is here." Curley dominated Boston politics for nearly forty years. He freely used patronage as a way to reward loyalty and get Irish votes, filling various city departments with his supporters. The Irish delighted in taking civil service jobs with their steady paychecks and long-term security. In cities with big Irish populations, police and fire departments often became staffed by Famine descendants.

In New York, the political machine was known as Tammany Hall, a powerful but corrupt organization that traded favors and jobs for votes and money. Out of Manhattan's fourth ward emerged Al Smith, the grandson of Irish immigrants, who rose from the tenements of the Lower East Side to seek the American presidency. As governor of New York in the 1920s, Smith originated ground-breaking social reform programs that later became the model for Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal. But as the Democratic candidate for president in 1928, Smith was relentlessly bashed by anti-Catholic activists and was resoundingly defeated, losing to incumbent President Herbert Hoover.

The most extraordinary Famine descendant was John Fitzgerald Kennedy, great-grandson of Patrick Kennedy, a farmer from County Wexford who had left Ireland in 1849. Although other Presidents, including Andrew Jackson and Woodrow Wilson had Irish roots, John Kennedy became the first Roman Catholic. To millions of Irish Catholic Americans, Kennedy's election in 1960 as the 35th President of the United States signaled an end to the century-long struggle for full acceptance in the U.S.

By the time of Kennedy's victory, descendants of the Famine immigrants were steadily leaving the old Irish working-class neighborhoods of Boston, New York and other cities and settling into the new suburbs sprouting across America. Irish Americans, three or four generations removed from their Famine forebears, now preferred a more generic middle-class American lifestyle complete with manicured lawns and backyard barbecues. Some of them even converted to Republicanism and wound up voting for another 'Irishman' named Ronald Reagan for president.

The Irish, the first big group of poor refugees ever to come to the United States, had borne the brunt of American resentment and prevailed. They could now count on the fact that their children might be educated at Harvard University or perhaps rise to a top position in any corporation or business, based on their talent and ability. And

they had paved the way for the waves of immigrants from Europe and other places that followed in their footsteps.

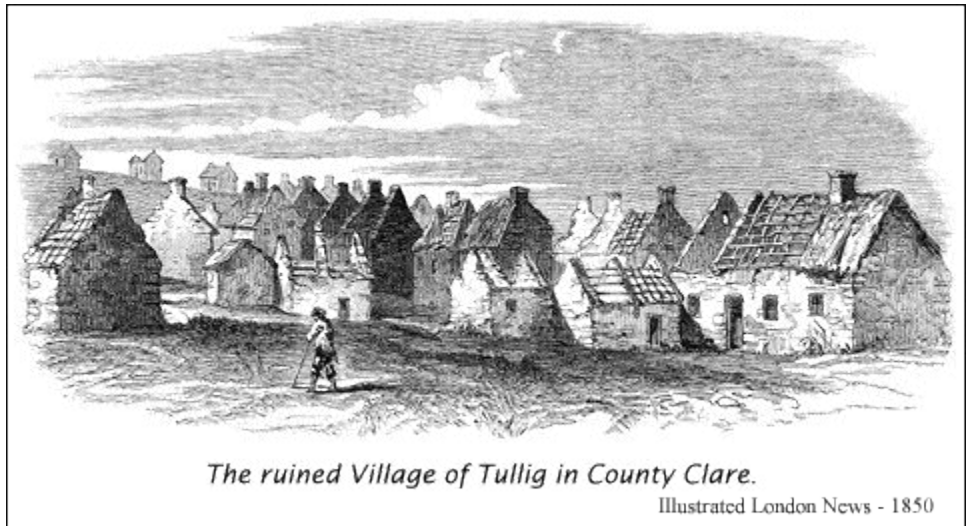
Hard work and sheer determination had allowed the Irish in America to overcome countless obstacles and find success and happiness. But their country of origin remained a very sad place in the decades following the Famine.

After the Famine

Hunger continued to be a problem for Ireland in the years after the Famine. The poor still lived as tenants-at-will, subject to the whim of the landlord. Any improvements they made to the land still became the property of the landlord upon eviction.

Making matters worse, the Encumbered Estates Act of 1849 allowed estates in severe debt to be auctioned off upon petition of creditors or even at the request of bankrupt landlords.

Land values tumbled as hundreds of estates with huge debts were auctioned off at bargain prices to British speculators interested solely in making a future profit. These new owners took a harsh view toward the penniless Irish tenant farmers still living on the land. They immediately raised rents and also conducted mass evictions to clear out the estates in order to create large cattle-grazing farms. Between 1849 and 1854 nearly 50,000 families were evicted.



The ruined Village of Tullig in County Clare.

Illustrated London News - 1850

In 1879, the blight returned in force bringing the possibility of renewed starvation and further evictions in the west of Ireland. But by this time, farmers and laborers throughout Ireland had become politically organized. They were now represented by a national alliance known as the Land League, led by Charles Stewart Parnell. The League, funded by donations from America, organized boycotts against notorious landlords, encouraged the defiant burning of leases, and had its members physically block evictions.

Parnell's "Land War" agitations brought the beginning of British political reforms helping Ireland's small farmers and tenants. The Land Act of 1881 granted official rent reductions and recognized the "interest" of tenants in their leased farms. The following year, Parnell agreed to end the Land War in return for the government's elimination of old unpaid rents.

The Wyndham Act of 1903 allowed most Irish tenants to actually purchase their holdings from their landlords with British government assistance. Landlords received a generous price set by the government while tenants repaid the government purchase over time. As a result, the centuries-old landlord system in Ireland, which had resulted in exploitation of the people and much suffering, was finally ended.

Road to the Republic

After the failure of the 1848 rebellion, leaders of the Young Ireland movement fled to America. The elite nationalist group was mainly composed of Irish Catholic lawyers and journalists. In New York City, free from British constraints, they began to agitate anti-British sentiment among Irish immigrants who now blamed the British government for everything, including their current misery in the slums of lower Manhattan.

Skilled propagandists such as John Mitchel inflamed the passions of downtrodden Irish Americans by summing up their Famine experience: "The English indeed, call that famine a dispensation of Providence; and ascribe it entirely to the blight of the potatoes. But potatoes failed in like manner all over Europe, yet there was no famine save in Ireland. The British account of the matter, then, is, first a fraud; second a blasphemy. The Almighty, indeed, sent the potato blight, but the English created the famine."

Another escaped Young Irishman, James Stephens, founded a secret new organization, known as the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB), dedicated to ousting the British from Ireland. The American branch of this became known as the Fenian Brotherhood, popularly referred to as the Fenians.

Meanwhile, back in Ireland, Queen Victoria chose to pay a State Visit during the summer of 1849 in an effort to boost morale and stabilize the political situation. Despite the enormous suffering the Irish had endured, the people greeted the Queen with "the utmost enthusiasm" at Cork, Dublin and Belfast. "Our entrance into Dublin was really a magnificent thing," the Queen noted in her diary. The extraordinary kindness of the Irish and the complete lack of any incidents of hostility left a deep impression on the Queen. However, such good feelings would not last.

In America, the movement to free Ireland from Britain's grasp continued to germinate. The Fenians successfully recruited battle-hardened Irish veterans of the U.S. Civil War and by 1867 felt confident enough to stage an armed rebellion back in Ireland. But like the Young Irishmen of 1848, the Fenians suffered from poor organization, a lack of weapons, and constant British spying. Their activities in Ireland became so well known that they were even mentioned in the local newspapers.

Despite this, a nationwide insurrection was launched on the night of March 6, 1867. But it soon fell apart, mainly due to poor communications, and was swiftly crushed. After the failed rebellion, Irish revolutionaries chose a more independent path with less Irish American involvement. Money from America would gladly be accepted but the movement to free Ireland would become a home-grown affair. In the U.S., however, Irish Americans remained fiercely loyal to the "Old Sod" and even revived faded traditions such as the Ancient Order of Hibernians and vigorously celebrated St. Patrick's Day.

The struggle for Ireland's independence continued well into the 1900s. On Easter Monday in April of 1916, two thousand men calling themselves the Irish Volunteers along with a Citizen Army of 200 staged an armed rebellion in Dublin and proclaimed a republic. After a week of fighting, which included the destruction of downtown Dublin, 400 rebels, civilians and British soldiers were dead. The rebels surrendered and fifteen leaders of the Easter Rising were taken into custody by the British. Fallout from their subsequent executions resulted in a surge of Irish support for the struggling independence movement.

In December 1918, general elections were held in Ireland. Most of the Irish seats in the British Parliament were won by members of the Irish revolutionary party Sinn Fein (meaning Ourselves Alone) which had already vowed not to take their elected seats in England. Instead, Sinn Fein set up its own parliament in Dublin, known as the Dail Eireann (Assembly of Ireland). The Dail promptly ratified the original Proclamation of the Republic from the Easter Rising.

As a result, violence erupted between British forces in Ireland and the Irish Republican Army (IRA) which became the Irish Volunteers new name. Hundreds were killed, including 23 civilians and soldiers on Bloody Sunday, November 21, 1920.

Guerrilla warfare escalated and raged on until July 1921 when a truce occurred. In December, an Anglo-Irish Treaty was signed by representatives of the Dail and the British government recognizing 26 counties in southern and western Ireland as the Irish Free State, which would become a member of the British Commonwealth of Nations. But violence once again erupted, this time among the Irish themselves, between those demanding full independence from Britain and those willing to accept inclusion in the Commonwealth (dominion status). Hundreds were killed in the 'Irish Civil War' between pro-Treaty and anti-Treaty forces.

Amid the conflict, the British-approved Irish Free State constitution went into effect. The Free State had a political status similar to that of Canada, also a member of the Commonwealth. An oath of allegiance to the British Crown had to be taken and the British could on occasion nullify Acts passed by its parliament.

By the 1930s, the Free State, under the leadership of Eamon De Valera, sought to end British influence in Ireland's internal affairs. The oath of allegiance to the Crown was abolished. Measures were also enacted to give Ireland a self-sufficient economy. In 1937, the second Irish constitution went into effect abolishing the Free State and restoring the name Ireland (Éire) as the title of the new independent democratic state, featuring a president as head of state, a prime minister leading the government, and a two-house legislature.

On Easter Monday, April 18, 1949, seven hundred years of British rule in Ireland was ended as the Republic of Ireland was finally proclaimed and all allegiance to the British Crown abolished. The British, however, retained sovereignty over six counties in Northern Ireland where antagonism between the Irish Catholic minority (33 percent) and British-backed Irish Protestants played out for decades in acts of violence and terrorism. By the late 1990s, more than 3400 lives had been lost in Northern Ireland, the Irish Republic and Britain, including many innocent children who just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Famine Deaths Unknown

British Census Commissioners in 1841 had declared the population of Ireland to be 8,175,124. During the Famine years, 1845-50, Ireland's population declined in the millions due to deaths from starvation and disease and from mass emigration to North America and England. However, nobody was keeping count of the actual number of people involved. Famine victims often died unseen in mud huts or along the roadside only to be quickly buried in shallow unmarked graves or in mass graves. The British government operated on the basis of general estimates made by officials and military personnel stationed in Ireland during the Famine years.

By 1851, it is known the population of Ireland had dropped to 6,552,385. In the absence of famine, likely population growth would have resulted in just over nine million inhabitants. Based on this assumption, about 2,500,000 persons were lost during the Famine, with an estimated million having emigrated and the resulting 1,500,000 having died from the effects of the famine. Deaths were highest among children under five years of age and among the elderly.

The rural far western portion of Ireland had the highest mortality rate with the worst occurring in County Mayo and County Sligo, which each averaged up to 60,000 deaths per year; followed by Roscommon, Galway, Leitrim, Cavan, and Clare Counties, each averaging up to 50,000 per year. Counties in the east and north of Ireland experienced far fewer deaths, including Dublin, Kildare, Carlow, Wexford, Louth, Down and Londonderry Counties which averaged up to 10,000 per year.

Total British monetary expenditure in Ireland from 1845-50 was about £7 million, less than one half of one percent of the gross national product for the period. Irish famine expenditures from local taxes and landlord borrowing was £8.5 million.

After the Famine, Ireland's slow economic progress resulted in a continued drain of talented, hard-working young people. Between 1851 and 1921, an estimated 4.5 million Irish left home and headed mainly to the United States.

Continued emigration combined with a lowered birth rate resulted in a steady decline of Ireland's population until the 1960s when it leveled off at about four million. Ireland since then has experienced a renewal of its economy due to the successful changeover from an agricultural to an industrial base, with 60 percent of the people now settled in urban areas. In the mid-1980s, however, another surge of emigration to America occurred after a severe downturn in the economy caused widespread unemployment. In all, over the past three centuries, an estimated seven million Irish are believed to have left Ireland for America.

Ireland today has a robust economy, equal with Britain, due in part to the arrival of high-tech companies from around the world seeking to make use of the country's hard working and conscientious work force. About 850 foreign companies, including 300 from the United States, now have operations in Ireland. In addition, tourism remains one of the most important sources of income, employing 15 percent of the entire workforce. Many of the visitors come from America, a nation with more than 40 million citizens who claim Irish ancestry.

World Hunger Today

In the 20th Century, conditions existed in many of the world's poorest countries similar to Ireland during its famine years including: reliance by the poor on a single staple crop for survival; economic dependence on the export of cash crops to the world's richest countries to pay off debts; foreign ownership of the land by rich individuals or corporations; use of the best farm land for profitable export crops such as cotton and coffee that do not feed local populations; governmental reluctance to pay for aid to the poor; widespread incurable disease; and reoccurring natural disasters such as floods and drought.

In the 150 years since the Great Hunger in Ireland, famines have continued to wreak havoc in the world. Countries that have suffered man-made or natural famine disasters since 1850 include: India, China, the former Soviet Union, Rwanda, Nigeria, Biafra, Ethiopia, Bangladesh, Somalia, Cambodia, North Korea, and The Sahel (eastern and southern Africa).

Man-made famines resulted from warfare, genocide, and misguided economic reforms. Natural famine disasters occurred in places such as Bangladesh, where poor people living on small holdings in the swampy delta islands experienced floods that ruined their rice crops.

In 1996, a World Food Summit was held in Rome, organized by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations. Among the findings discussed -- Throughout the world today one person in five lives in hunger, totaling some 800 million persons, including 200 million children under five years of age who suffer from chronic malnutrition and food deficiencies. Eighty-eight countries, almost half of which are situated in sub-Saharan Africa, are faced with repeated threats of famine. Half of humanity has a daily income of under three U.S. dollars. An estimated 10 million persons are reported to die every year from hunger or hunger-related causes.

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Select Bibliography

For your convenience, links are provided to Amazon.com if you wish buy any of the books to read more about the Famine and Irish history. The books (and videos) might also be available at your neighborhood bookshop or local library.

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Picture Credits

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