

13.10 Death and the Great Irish Famine



Questions

1. Why were people “consigned to the earth without a coffin, and without the offices of religion”?
2. Why were people so vulnerable to fever and diarrhea?
3. Why do commentators report that dogs healthy while people are dying?
4. In your opinion, why did the Great Irish Famine leave the people of Ireland in a state of shock for decades?

“At this moment, the funeral cart with its attendant came towards us; it stopped opposite the cottage; a deal coffin of a large size, in order to suit the dimensions of all persons, lay jolting at the top . . . We learnt that the coffin was for a woman who lay dead in that house, and that four others of the same family lay sick of the fever, unable even to assist in removing the body of their relation. The man with the cart called to another [and] both disappeared within the shadow of the door way. Presently they returned, bearing between them the dead body, over which a scanty tattered yellow rag had just been thrown, not sufficient however to cover the whole length of the figure, or to prevent one’s seeing the livid lifeless arms as they hung down swinging and knocking against the ground. They hastily flung it into the shell, the cart drove off, and the remains were hurriedly consigned to the earth without a coffin, and without the offices of religion!”

The *Cork Examiner* reported, December, 1846: “Disease and death in every quarter -- the once hardy population worn away to emaciated skeletons -- fever, dropsy, diarrhea, and famine rioting in every filthy hovel, and sweeping away whole families ... seventy-five tenants ejected here, and a whole village in the last stage of destitution there ... dead bodies of children flung into holes hastily scratched in the earth without shroud or coffin ... every field becoming a grave, and the land a wilderness.”

The Reverend Henry Brennan, parish priest of Kilglass in County Roscommon, wrote to the editor of the *Freeman’s Journal*, on 14 July 1847: Sir -- There is not in Ireland any parish where fever and destitution prevail to so fearful an extent as here ... By this time fever has made its way into almost every house ... In very many instances the dead bodies are thrown in waste cabins and dykes and are devoured by dogs. In some parts the fields are bleached with the bones of the dead that were previously picked by dogs.

Asneath Nicholson describes the Great Irish Famine: Six men, beside Mr. Griffith, crossed with me in an open boat, and we landed, not buoyantly, upon the once pretty island. The first that called my attention was the death-like stillness -- nothing of life was seen or heard, excepting occasionally a dog. These looked so unlike all others I had seen among the poor -- I unwittingly said -- ‘How can the dogs look so fat and shining here, where there is no food for the people?’ ‘Shall I tell her?’ said the pilot to Mr. Griffith, not supposing that I heard him. This was enough: if anything were wanting to make the horrors of famine complete, this supplied the deficiency.

