

Impact of the Great Irish Famine on World History

by Maureen Murphy

The consequences of the Great Irish Famine altered more than the course of Irish history; the Irish Diaspora changed the shape of world history, especially that of the United States, Canada, Australia and England. In the 1990 federal census, 44 million Americans voluntarily reported their ethnicity as Irish.

Study of the Great Irish Famine allows students to explore a number of essential social studies questions related to the causes of events and the responsibility of government to respond to them. No one knows exactly how many people died in Ireland's Great Famine of 1845-52, but in a population of more than eight million people, the death count reached at least one million. Another million and a half people emigrated. This human disaster occurred within the jurisdiction of Great Britain, the richest and most industrially advanced empire in the world at that time.

According to historian Christine Kineally in an article in *Natural History* magazine (January 1998), "the potato blight was an ecological disaster that struck Ireland when it was particularly vulnerable. But what transformed the blight into a famine was the failure of the British government, along with landlords and merchants, to meet the challenge and implement effective action." Conditions in Ireland became so bad during the potato famine that according to one report: "Most of the dead were buried in fields or along the roads. The corpse was frequently wrapped with straw ropes and buried in this way without a coffin. . . . Tombstones were not erected as it was difficult to find men with the strength to make the graves. . . . Bodies actually lay unburied by hedges for rats soon devoured the flesh and only the skeleton remained." During the famine people died from a variety of causes, though relatively few from actual starvation. Most were felled by relapsing fever, typhus, dysentery, and cholera. Their vulnerability to these diseases made worse by hunger, inadequate shelter, overcrowding in workhouses, and hard labor on work relief projects.

Study of the Great Irish Famine helps students better understand problems with contemporary relief efforts. A major question to consider is "What should the British Government have done to alleviate suffering?" The New York State Great Irish Famine curriculum is on-line at <http://www.emsc.nysed.gov/nyssa/gif/curriculum.html>.

How did the Potato Blight Devastate the Irish Countryside?

Source: Peter Gray (1995). *The Irish Famine*, NY: Harry N. Abrams.

1. W. Steuart Trench was an Irish land agent and experimental farmer in Queen's County at the beginning of the Famine period. This is his account of the second attack of the potato blight. It was published in 1868 in a book *Realities of Irish Life*.

On August 1st of that calamitous year, 1846, I was startled by hearing a sudden and strange rumor that all the potato fields in the district were blighted; and that a stench had arisen emanating from their decaying stalks. I immediately rode up to visit my crop, and test the truth of this report; but I found it as luxuriant as ever, in full blossom, the stalks matted across each other with richness, and promising a splendid produce, without any unpleasant smell whatever. On coming down from the mountain, I rode into the lowland country, and there I found the report to be but too true. The leaves of the potatoes on many fields I passed were quite withered, and a strange stench, such as I had never smelt before, but which became a well-known feature in "the blight" for years after, filled the atmosphere adjoining each field of potatoes.

The next day I made further inquiries, and I found the disease was fast extending, and on rooting up some of the potato bulbs under the withered stalks, I found that decay had set in, and that the potato was rapidly blackening and melting away. In fields having a luxuriant crop, the stench was generally the first indication of disease, and the withered leaf followed in a day or two afterwards. Much alarm now prevailed in the country; people looked blank enough, as they asked each other if they had seen this new and formidable disease. Those, like me, who had staked a large amount of capital on the crop, hitherto almost a certainty, and at least as sure as the crop of wheat or turnips

or any other agricultural produce, became extremely uneasy; whilst the poorer farmers looked on helplessly and with feelings of dire dismay at the total disappearance of all they had counted on for food.

On August 6, 1846, I rode up as usual to my mountain property, and my feelings may be imagined when before I saw the crop, I smelt the fearful stench, now so well known and recognized as the death-sign of each field of potatoes the luxuriant stalks soon withered, the leaves decayed, the disease extended to the tubers, and the stench from the rotting of such an immense amount of rich vegetable matter became almost intolerable. But my own losses and disappointments, deeply as I felt them, were soon merged in the general desolation, misery, and starvation which now rapidly affected the poorer classes around me and throughout Ireland.

It is true that in the more cultivated districts of the Queen's County and the midland counties generally, not many deaths occurred from actual starvation. I mean, that people were not found dead on the roads or in the fields from sudden deprivation of food; but they sank gradually from impure and insufficient diet; and fever, dysentery, the crowding in the workhouse or hardship on the relief works, carried thousands to a premature grave. The crop of all crops, on which they depended for food, had suddenly melted away, and no adequate arrangements had been made to meet this calamity, -- the extent of which was so sudden and so terrible that no one had appreciated it in time -- and thus thousands perished almost without any effort to save themselves.

Questions

1. How did Trench first learn about the potato blight?
2. What was the first sign that the blight had arrived?
3. Why did Irish potato farmers have a sense of helplessness?
4. What happened to Mr. Trench's crop?
5. According to Mr. Trench, why was mortality so high during the famine?

2. Elihu Burritt was an American pacifist. He visited Skibbereen, Ireland in February, 1847. This passage is from his account of the visit.

He lived several miles from the center of the town, in one of the rural districts, where he found himself on the eve of perishing with his family of seven small children. Life was worth the last struggle of nature, and the miserable skeleton of a father had fastened his youngest child to his back, and with four more by his side, had staggered up to the door. The hair upon his face was nearly as long as that upon his head. His cheeks were fallen in, and his jaws so distended that he could scarcely articulate a word. The children's appearance, though common to thousands of the same age in this region of the shadow of death, was indescribable. Their paleness was not that of common sickness. There was no sallowness in it. They did not look as if newly raised from the grave and to life before the blood had begun to fill their veins anew: but as if they had just been thawed out of the ice, in which they had been imbedded until their blood had turned to water.

Question: In your opinion, why was Mr. Burritt driven to write about this man and his children?

3. William Bennett was an English Quaker who traveled to County Mayo, Ireland in 1847 to distribute seeds.

My hand trembles while I write. The scenes of human misery and degradation we witnessed will haunt my imagination, with the vividness and power of some horrid and tyrannous delusion, rather than the features of a sober reality. We entered a cabin. Stretched in one dark corner, scarcely visible, from the smoke and rags that covered them, were three children huddled together. Lying there because they were too weak to rise, pale and ghastly, their little limbs perfectly emaciated, eyes sunk, voice gone, and evidently in the last stage of actual starvation. Crouched over the turf embers was another form, wild and all but naked, scarcely human in appearance. It stirred not, nor noticed us. On some straw, sodden upon the ground moaning piteously, was a shriveled old woman. Above her, on something like a ledge, was a young woman, with sunken cheeks, a mother I have no doubt, who scarcely raised her eyes in answer to our enquiries, but pressed her hand upon her forehead, with a look of unutterable anguish and despair.

We entered upward of fifty of these tenements. The scene was one and invariable, differing in little but the number of the sufferers, or of the groups, occupying the several corners within. Perhaps the poor children presented

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THE FAMINE IN IRELAND.—FUNERAL AT SKIBBEREEN.—FROM A SKETCH BY MR. H. SMITH, COBK.

<http://vassun.vassar.edu/~sttaylor/FAMINE/ILN/Mortality/Mortality.html>

the most piteous and heart-rending spectacle. Many were too weak to stand. Every infantile expression entirely departed; and in some, reason and intelligence had evidently flown. Many were remnants of families, crowded together in one cabin; orphaned little relatives taken in by the equally destitute, and even strangers, for these poor people are kind to one another to the end.

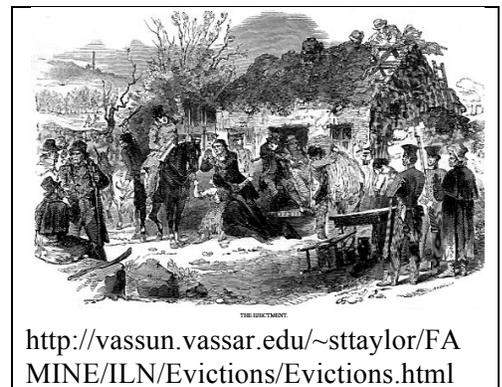
In one cabin was a sister, just dying, lying by the side of her little brother, just dead. I have worse than this to relate, but it is useless to multiply details, and they are, in fact, unfit. They did but rarely complain. When inquired of, what was the matter, the answer was alike in all, -- "*Tha shein ukrosh*" -- indeed the hunger. We truly learned the terrible meaning of that sad word, *ukrosh*.

Questions

1. In your opinion, why does Mr. Bennett begin by saying, "My hand trembles while I write"?
2. Why does Mr. Bennett say that "the poor children presented the most piteous and heart-rending spectacle"?
3. Mr. Bennett writes, "We truly learned the terrible meaning of that sad word, *ukrosh*." While the word technically means hunger, what else could it mean? Explain your answer.
4. James Hack Tuke, a Quaker from York in England, writes about the mass eviction of tenant farmers.

The landlords of Mayo are pursuing a course which cannot fail to add to the universal wretchedness and poverty which exist. The corn (grain) crops, bountiful as they may be, are not sufficient to meet the landlords' claim for rent and arrears. In every direction, the agents of the landlords, armed with the full powers of the law, are at work "canting" the small patches of oats or potatoes. Extortionate charges must be paid by the unfortunate tenant. Even the produce of seed, distributed through the agency of benevolent associations, has been totally swept away.

To add to the universal distress caused by this system of seizure, eviction is in many cases practiced. I saw a memorable instance of this mode of proceeding, at the wretched fishing village of Kiel. A driver



had ejected some twenty families. A crowd of these miserable ejected creatures collected around us, bewailing, with bitter lamentations, their hard fate. One old grey-headed man came tottering up to us, bearing in his arms his bedridden wife. Putting her down at our feet, he pointed, in silent agony to her, and then to his roofless dwelling, the charred timbers of which were scattered in all directions around. This man said he owed little more than one year's rent, and had lived in the village, which had been the home of his forefathers, all his life.

Questions

1. Why were Irish families unable to survive on other crops after the failure of the potato crop?
2. What happened to a family that owed money for rent?
3. Under the law, landlords had the right to evict tenants unable to pay their rent. In your opinion, what option did landlords have? What could the government have done? Why?
5. S. Godolphin Osborne was a Church of England clergyman. In this passage he reports on conditions in the Limerick workhouse during the summer of 1850.

The first Union-house we visited was that at Limerick. Last year, when I went over it, I found it clean and in good order; I now found it every way the reverse. In the parent and auxiliary houses there was no less a number than 8,000 paupers; every department, except the fever hospital, showed evident symptoms of gross neglect. I have no words with which I can give any real idea of the sad condition of the inmates of two large yards at the parent house, in which were a very large number of young female children; many of them were clothed in the merest dirty rags, and of these they wore a very scanty allowance; they were in the dirt collected on their persons for many weeks; there was not about them the slightest evidence of any of the least care being taken them; as they filled before me, two and two, they were a spectacle to fill any humane heart with indignation: sore feet, sore hands, sore heads; ophthalmia evident in the case of the great proportion of them; some of them were suffering from it in its very worst stage; they were evidently eat up with vermin -- very many were mere skeletons.

Question: What happened to the Limerick workhouse between 1849 and 1850? Why?

