



# The Great Hunger

*Ireland's potato famine was caused  
as much by a government's gross  
negligence as by a devastation of crops*

By Eugene Finerman

---

In 1845, the population of Ireland was 8.5 million. Within five years, that population had been reduced to 6 million. More than 1 million people had starved or died of the diseases of malnutrition. Another million had fled Ireland, desperate to escape the famine and grinding poverty. A fungal blight had destroyed the potato crop that sustained a third of the Irish population. More than the crop failed, however; so did the entire system by which England governed Ireland. John Mitchel, a witness to the period that the Irish remember as “The Great Hunger,” wrote, “The Almighty, indeed, sent the potato blight, the English created the famine.”

The Irish were a conquered people. In the 17th century, English armies had dominated the island. To maintain their control and suppress any future resistance, the English intended to break the Irish people, reducing them to a state of passive destitution. New laws forbade the Gaelic language and Catholic education. Irish landowners were stripped of their property; both aristocrats and small farmers became landless peasants. Northern and eastern Ireland had the most fertile land on the island; there the Irish

Catholics were driven out and supplanted by British Protestants. The uprooted Irish were forced into the western half of the island, where the soil was poor and rocky. Even here, however, the English claimed the land and exacted rent. The Irish now were tenants in their own country.

Throughout the 18th century, two Irelands evolved. The eastern half of the island, with its Protestant enclaves, reflected the flourishing culture and wealth of the British Empire. Even Catholics prospered in Dublin, working as tradesmen for the British. But western Ireland, where the majority of the people lived, was sinking into feudalism and chronic poverty. There the Irish peasants worked on the estates of the landlords; for their labors, they were granted housing and a few acres to grow their own food. But the homes were hovels—one-room huts—and the land was poor and yielded little. However, the potato seemed impervious to this harsh soil and produced crops sufficient to feed the tenant and his family for the entire year. So these tenant farmers—one-third of Ireland’s population—came to depend on potatoes as their chief, often sole, source of food.

---

*“That 1 million should have died in what was then part of the richest and most powerful nation in the world is something that still causes pain as we reflect on it today. Those who governed at London at the time failed their people, standing by while a crop failure turned into a massive human tragedy.”*

-British Prime Minister Tony Blair, 1997

By the 1830s, the British government started to recognize Irish poverty as a problem rather than a goal. A royal commission was shocked by the state of the Irish peasant; “their sufferings greater, we believe, than the people of any other country in Europe.” But the commission could not arrive at any meaningful solutions to this chronic poverty. It encouraged the British landowners to be more generous and endow workhouses for the poor. Unfortunately, charity was not a conspicuous trait among the gentry. Furthermore, workhouses only served the completely destitute, not the millions of working poor. Ireland’s cycle of poverty and stagnation would not be ended by a government report—but by a fungal spore.

The scientific name of the plant disease is *phytophthora infestans*, but the Irish and history know it as the potato blight. The origins of the disease are a matter of conjecture. In the early 1840s, American potato crops were ruined. In the summer of 1845, the potato blight was in England; that September, like so many of Ireland’s other problems, the blight arrived from England. The leaves on potato plants blackened and curled; the plants then would rot and stink, the plants’ potatoes were ruined. Worse, the blight easily spread, the fungal spores carried by the wind.

Half of Ireland’s potato crop was lost that year. Many of the Irish faced starvation and were reduced to eating weeds and grass. The British government did respond to the prospect of famine, purchasing £100,000 of cornmeal (\$11 million in

2007 dollars) to replace a potato crop worth £3,000,000 (about \$324 million in 2007 dollars). The cornmeal was available at government warehouses and offered at a discount price. So, a hungry Irishman merely had to be in the vicinity and have the money for the purchase.

The potato blight continued in 1846 and destroyed three-quarters of that year’s crop. The famine was spreading and the British government had to respond. To bring desperately needed management to its relief program, the Crown appointed Charles Trevelyan as the administrator. The assistant secretary to the Treasury proved a tireless administrator but also a dogmatic bigot. He regarded the Irish as lazy, ignorant people who were the chief cause of their own poverty. In his view, the famine had an inherent efficiency: it was nature’s “mechanism for reducing surplus population.” If the Irish expected to be fed by the British government, they would have to work. Some 700,000 men and women were employed in breaking and carrying rocks for road construction. There was no special provision for feeding children; they had to do roadwork, too. For their toil, the Irish laborers earned porridge and bread, not a nourishing ration but it did avert starvation.

If these people were saved, more than a million were not. Children were the first to die. Then adults succumbed. Entire families were found dead in their hovels. Some had starved, but most died of the diseases of malnutrition: dysentery, scurvy and typhus. There was not enough wood

**The Illustrated London News in 1886 portrayed Irish citizens collecting limpets and seaweed for food in the west of Ireland after failure of the potato crop, page 20. In 1848, the publication illustrated how many Irish peasant families were unable to pay rent because of the failed potato crop and were evicted from their homes, right.**



**Illness was rampant on “coffin ships” from Ireland to the United States and nearly one-quarter of the passengers who made the trek to escape the potato famine died on the voyage.**

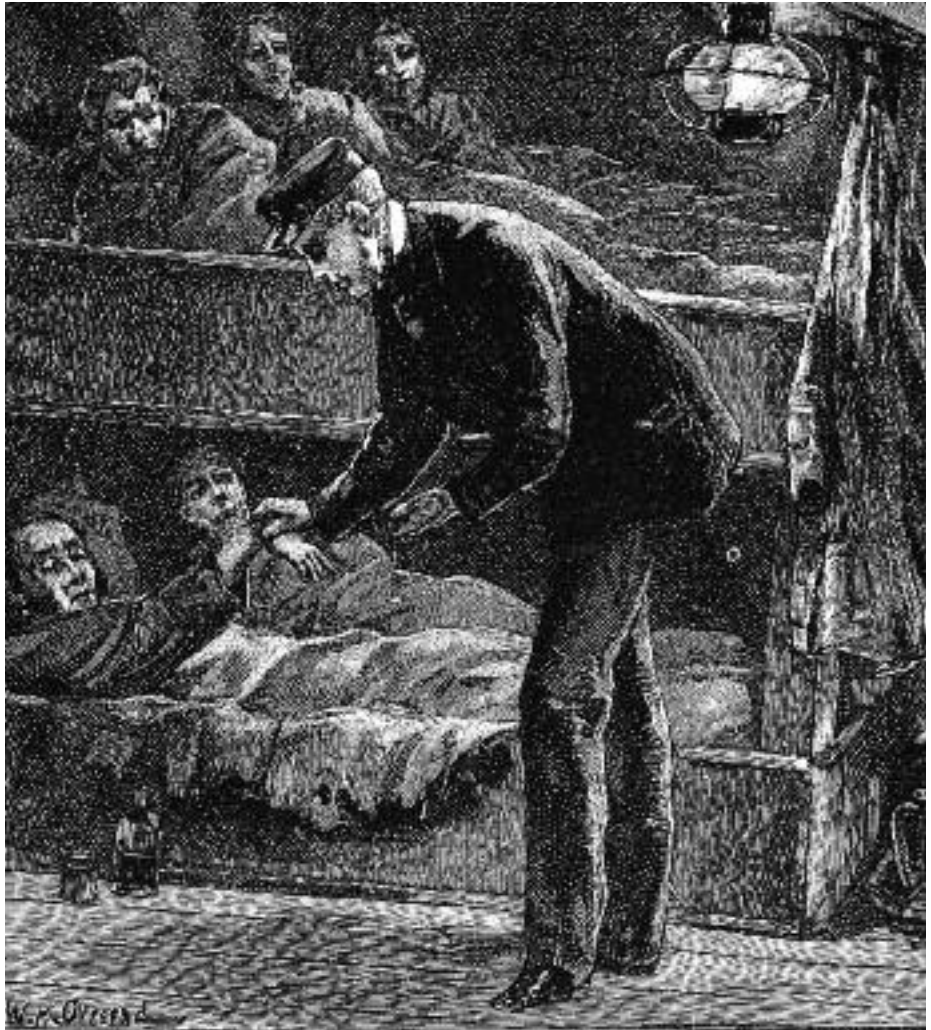
in all of Ireland for coffins, and the survivors had little strength to bury their dead. The victims of the Great Hunger lay in unmarked graves covered only by a few inches of soil.

Yet, while millions went hungry, Ireland was shipping grain and meat abroad. The potato blight had no effect on the other crops. The livestock of Ireland ate better than the field hands. Committed to free trade, the British government refused to stop the export of grain from a starving country; however, the Crown did increase the number of troops to protect the grain shipments.

In the fall of 1847, the potato crop was free of blight but the crop itself was meager. Few Irish, that spring, had the seed potatoes or the optimism to plant a new crop, and so that year’s harvest was one-quarter the normal yield. Ireland would still go hungry. In England, there was growing public criticism of the mean-spirited nature of the government’s work projects. (A prominent young woman named Victoria was among the critics.) The British government relented and, in place of work projects, it began a program of free soup kitchens for the poor. The government did expect that the landowners of Ireland would subsidize half the cost of this program. In the words of Trevelyan, “Let Irish property support Irish poverty.”

But the landowners of Ireland came up with a different way to deal with the poor: evict and banish them from the district. Landowners and, by no coincidence, also the local magistrates, could call upon the British army to enforce the evictions. An estimated half million people were driven from their homes. But many landowners had a more subtle strategy to coax the Irish away: boat tickets to America. The tickets were relatively inexpensive, especially when compared to supporting indigent Irish for an indefinite time. And the Irish needed little persuasion to migrate. The American economy could not be worse than Ireland’s, and the government had to be better.

For many Irish, however, the voyage was the conclusion of a tragedy. The ships that made the crossing were dilapidated and unsanitary, crammed with hungry and sick



refugees. No adequate provision was made for feeding the passengers. Nearly a quarter of the passengers died on the voyage; so the boats were remembered as “the coffin ships.” Yet, 1 million Irish did land in America.

The census of 1850 reported that one-fourth of the population of New York City was born in Ireland. By then, the potato blight had ended in Ireland, but the poverty continued and so did the migration. In 1850, the population of Ireland was 6 million; by 1900, it had fallen to 4.5 million. The chief export of Ireland was its own people. Between 1851 and 1921, the year Ireland won independence from Britain, an estimated 4 million people left Ireland. Most went to America. Their lives in America confronted prejudice, poverty and struggle, but it also offered hope and opportunity that they could not find in Ireland. The potato famine was almost as much a milestone in American history as it was for Ireland. ■

Source for calculations of British pounds sterling to 2007 U.S. dollars (latest figures available): Lawrence H. Officer and Samuel H. Williamson, “Computing ‘Real Value’ Over Time With a Conversion Between U.K. Pounds and U.S. Dollars, 1830 - 2007,” *MeasuringWorth*, 2008. <http://www.measuringworth.com/exchange/>