



The Irish Potato Famine: The History and Legacy of the Mass Starvation in Ireland During the 19th Century

Charles River Editors

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*Includes pictures

*Includes accounts of the Famine written by survivors and newspapers

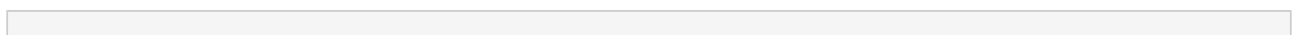
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“I have called it an artificial famine: that is to say, it was a famine which desolated a rich and fertile island that produced every year abundance and superabundance to sustain all her people and many more. The English, indeed, call the famine a 'dispensation of Providence;' and ascribe it entirely to the blight on potatoes. But potatoes failed in like manner all over Europe; yet there was no famine save in Ireland.” – John Mitchel, Young Ireland Movement

Anyone who has ever heard of “the luck of the Irish” knows that it is not something to wish on someone, for few people in the British Isles have ever suffered as the Irish have. As one commissioner looking into the situation in Ireland wrote in February 1845, "It would be impossible adequately to describe the privations which they habitually and silently endure...in many districts their only food is the potato, their only beverage water...their cabins are seldom a protection against the weather...a bed or a blanket is a rare luxury...and nearly in all their pig and a manure heap constitute their only property." Even his fellow commissioners agreed and expressed “our strong sense of the patient endurance which the laboring classes have exhibited under sufferings greater, we believe, than the people of any other country in Europe have to sustain."

Still, in their long history of suffering, nothing was ever so terrible as what the Irish endured during the Great Potato Famine that struck the country in the 1840s and produced massive upheaval for several years. While countless numbers of Irish starved, the famine also compelled many to leave, and all the while, the British were exporting enough food from Ireland on a daily basis to prevent the starvation. Over the course of 10 years, the population of Ireland decreased by about 1.5 million people, and taken together, these facts have led to charges as severe as genocide. At the least, it indicated a British desire to remake Ireland in a new mold. As historian Christine Kinealy noted, “As the Famine progressed, it became apparent that the government was using its information not merely to help it formulate its relief policies, but also as an opportunity to facilitate various long-desired changes within Ireland. These included population control and the consolidation of property through various means, including emigration... Despite the overwhelming evidence of prolonged distress caused by successive years of potato blight, the underlying philosophy of the relief efforts was that they should be kept to a minimalist level; in fact they actually decreased as the Famine progressed.”

Although the Famine obviously weakened Ireland and its people, it also stiffened Irish resolve and helped propel independence movements in its wake. By the time the Famine was over, it had changed the face of not just Ireland but also Great Britain, and it had even made its effects felt across the Atlantic in the still young United States of America. The Irish Potato Famine looks at the history of the Great Famine and what it produced. Along with pictures and a bibliography, you will learn about the Irish Potato Famine like never before, in no time at all.



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