

The Great Famine

The Great Famine, also known as the Great Hunger reduced the population of Ireland by three million people, during the mid-19th century. It is estimated that one million or more died of starvation and disease. While the famine was initiated by a potato blight, its actual causes are rooted much deeper in the economic system in place at the time and the attitude of the English to the people of Ireland

Causes

The Economic system in Ireland during the early 19th century was largely an agricultural one. The country had no manufacturing centers to speak of and most of the people were subsistence farmers.

During the early 1800's, the potato had become one of the main crops of Ireland. It was an easy crop to maintain, and gave a bountiful harvest, even greater than that of wheat. One acre of potatoes could and frequently did feed a family of five or six for the entire year. The other crops and food sources; grain, meat and dairy products were largely exported to England by landowners, where they could earn a larger profit.

The common people in Ireland, which was over one third of the population, therefore largely subsisted on potatoes, while living with their families in small one-room shacks which dotted the countryside. Many others rented their land, or paid a rack (bed) tax to work someone else's land or in sweathouses. Their only chance to get ahead in life was that of larger harvests, which required the use of strains of potatoes that were also susceptible to disease. By this means the stage was set for the disaster that followed.

1. Describe the economy of Ireland in the 1800's.
2. What was the key crop in Ireland? What happened to the other Irish crops?

The Famine

The potato famine in Ireland was in full swing during 1847 and 1848, but actually started in 1845. During that year, the potato blight took one third of the potato crop in Ireland. Times although harsh, would soon progress into a disaster. In 1846, the entire potato crop of the country was lost, while starvation and disease were rampant among the lowest classes.

The English government reacted by sending over scientists to study the problem, while keeping exports of grain and meat at the same levels. It seems that any reduction in exports, while possibly saving thousands of people would raise the price of food in England. This apparently was to the English, an unacceptable answer.

Many people could not afford to pay their rent or rack tax due to the blight and were forcibly evicted, while many others simply starved on their own land. The government finally offered food to the starving millions at reduced prices; but to people that had no money at all with which to buy it. The only option too many was immigration, frequently paid for by landlords, but at a price which guaranteed the worst possible conditions. These ships were crammed beyond normal limits with starving and diseased people; and many more died during the voyages.

The situation was further aggravated when the English government demanded payment of taxes to further subsidize relief efforts. What little money that did actually trickle out of Ireland was used for ridiculous purposes. Corn was bought from America and shipped to Ireland, but for every ship that came, four or more left with food for England. In 1847, the famine was causing the death of people at such a large rate, that many were buried in long, communal trenches.

1. How did England react to the famine?
2. How did England attempt to solve the famine? Did it help?

Public opinion to the disaster was beginning to have an affect, however. The English government advanced a loan of ten million pounds in an effort to alleviate the situation. Men were put to work at half wages in purely inconsequential labors. The reason for this was specific, as the law forbade the use of this money in any manner that could give advantage to an Irishman in business over any Englishman. Therefore these men built roads to nowhere and docks where there was no city or port. They could not plant food with this money earned, as this would be a violation of the law. Troops were also sent in, but not to protect the peace, they were to collect taxes and rents owed to Landowners and the Government. In many cases, these troops confiscated the relief food and seed being sent in to Ireland.

Many Irish were arrested and transported to the colonies under the Coercion Act for not having a home, while many more were arrested under the Vagrancy Act for not having a visible means of support. In 1848, the situation remained very bad, even though the blight had ended. The potato crop for various reasons had not been planted. Either people were not allowed to plant, or they simply were not there to do it. By 1849 and 1850, the famine was largely at an end. But this was not due to relief efforts, it was simply because one third of the population of Ireland had died or been shipped away to foreign lands.

1. How did the English government attempt to alleviate the famine?
2. Why did the famine end?

Aftereffects

The Great Famine of Ireland had many lasting effects. The native tongue of the land, largely spoken by the lower class, was almost completely eradicated. The landlord/ landowner system created by the Plantation of Ireland was also almost completely destroyed. Of the Irish that survived, many now realized that they could never trust the English to care for them in times of need. A great number of these people joined the Irish Republican Brotherhoods, which was in time to spark the revolution and the later freedom of Ireland.

This famine and the resultant deaths were due to a natural disaster worsened by English policies, policies that were tailored to the needs of English businesses and the general well being of the English public at the expense of the Irish. Similar effects were being felt at the same time in Scotland where the Highland Clearances were under way. The weight of evidence leads to one conclusion: that English policies towards Ireland and Scotland during this time were instrumental in the death and dislocation of thousands of the poorest people who inhabited those lands.

1. What were some effects of the famine?
2. What was the true cause of the Irish famine?

The Misery that was Ireland: The Potato Famine

In the mid-1840s the Irish potato crop was struck by the potato blight, a plant disease that wiped out the crop. Famine ensued in Ireland, hard times were felt in England, and a general economic recession followed on the Continent, which would spark the Revolutions of 1848. In many ways, the Great Famine was the result of centuries-long English policies in Ireland that had resulted in an impoverished peasantry wholly dependent upon one food crop, the potato. The British government barely intervened, leaving the Irish to their fate and to what private charity could provide, which was precious little. Millions perished and millions more emigrated to England and the United States. This selection is an eyewitness account of conditions in Ireland in 1847.

"I did not see a child playing in the streets or on the roads; no children are to be seen outside the doors but a few sick and dying children. In the districts which are now being depopulated by starvation, coffins are only used for the more wealthy. The majority were taken to the grave without any coffin, and buried in their rags: in some instances even the rags are taken from the corpse to cover some still living body.

On arriving at Cappagh, in the first house I saw a dead child lying in a corner of the house, and two children, pale as death, with their heads hanging down upon their breasts sitting by a small fire. The father had died on the road coming home from work. One of the children, a lad seventeen years of age, had been found, in the absence of his mother, who was looking for food, lying dead, with his legs held out of the fire by the little child which I then saw lying dead. Two other children had also died. The mother and the two children still alive had lived on one dish of barley for the last four days. On entering another house the doctor said, "Look there, Sir, you can't tell whether they are boys or girls." Taking up a skeleton child, he said, "Here is the way it is with them all; their legs swing and rock like the legs of a doll, they have the smell of mice."

Source: W. Stewart Trench, *Realities of Irish Life* (London: Longmans, Green, 1847).

1. How were the people buried?
2. What does this description tell you about the Irish Famine?
3. What could have been done to prevent this event from occurring?