

## The Famine & The Irish diaspora

"The English indeed, call that famine a dispensation of Providence; and ascribe it entirely to the blight of the potatoes. But potatoes failed in like manner all over Europe, yet there was no famine save in Ireland. The British account of the matter, then, is, first a fraud; second a blasphemy. The Almighty, indeed, sent the potato blight, but the English created the famine." .....John Mitchell

**The Great Famine "an Gorta Mór"** In 1700 the population of Ireland was 2 million people. By 1845 it had reached over ten million. Without an increase in the industrial base, the much larger population increased the demand for land in the rural areas. This resulted in smaller, uneconomic holdings with higher rents.

Thousands were reduced to poverty and to cope with the increasing problem the government established institutions known as "Workhouses". To avail of the privilege of living in these accommodations, one had first to give up their home. Families were separated as the women and younger children entered the women's dorms and the men and older sons were housed in another. Few, regardless of circumstances, wanted to avail of the opportunity, and death by starvation was almost a welcome choice.

Corn and pigs were raised to pay the rent. The potato had become the staple diet for the native Irish. It did not require rich soil and a small patch could produce an annual supply. It was, however, subject to disease, and on a few occasions before, the disease occurred only in certain areas. In 1845, a new disease struck called "Phytophthora infestans" or blight, and the stalks turned black as the potatoes rotted in the ground. Some of the crop had already been harvested that year before the disease struck and that was barely enough to prevent disaster. However, when the same blight struck the following year there was little or no choice, as thousands flocked to the workhouses. Death was everywhere, as they lay down in the fields and died. Others perished along the roads and the remains of whole families died in their tiny mud cabins. Thousands and thousands sought refuge in barely seaworthy vessels bound for the U.S. called coffin ships where as many as 30% died en route from hunger and disease.

During the Famine there was no shortage of food. The Irish tenants were still forced to sell their corn to pay their rents. Those who could not pay were evicted. As thousands and thousands of tons of corn and beef were exported people lay dying from starvation. For the most part appeals to the government for relief fell on deaf ears.

Relief did come eventually, but was tragically mismanaged. Much of the money was exhausted paying managers and overseers and of little consequence to the starving masses. Relief works, the building of "follies" simply to provide some form of work so

the Irish could purchase corn from the American Indians ,took too long to implement as thousands more perished. Learning of the plight of the Irish the Choctaw Indians raised a considerable contribution while London looked on, and did less. Daniel O'Connell condemned the government for their failure to act decisively and urged Free Food be distributed at once.

Sir Charles Edward Trevelyan As Assistant Secretary to the Treasury he was placed in charge of the Government relief to the victims of the Irish Famine. Trevelyan published his views on the matter. He saw the Famine as a mechanism for reducing surplus population". "The judgement of God sent the calamity to teach the Irish a lesson, that calamity must not be too much mitigated".

Death was so rampant every where you look the government resorted to burying the victims in Mass Graves spread across Ireland. There are about 200 mass Famine graves in Ireland. During the Famine at least one million people died in Ireland. Thousands more died trying to escape, being buried at sea and thousands more died a short time after arriving in a distant port. A million or more emigrated to America, while others sought work in England to escape the situation.

The 1841 census of Ireland revealed a population of 10,897,449, while the 1846 population was 11,815,011. The 1851 census recorded a population of 6,552,385. This shows a loss of over 5,000,000 people or about 50% of the population.

Emigration during the famine years of 1845 to 1850 was to England, Scotland, the United States, Canada, and Australia. Of the 100,000 Irish that sailed to Canada in 1847, only 60,000 were still alive one month after landing. Among the 40,000 dead was Henry Ford's father's mother who died en route from Cork or in quarantine on Quebec's Grosse Ile.

Hunger continued to plague the Irish for years after the Famine. The poor still lived as tenants-at-will, subject to the pleasure of the landlord, and any property improvements they made reverted to the landlord upon eviction. The Encumbered Estates Act of 1849 allowed estates in severe debt to be auctioned off upon petition of creditors. Land values tumbled as hundreds of estates with huge debts were auctioned off at discount prices to British speculators interested solely in making a future profit. They immediately raised rents and conducted mass evictions to clear out the estates in order to create large cattle-grazing farms. Between 1849 and 1854 nearly 50,000 families were evicted.

By 1854, between 1½ and 2 million Irish left their country due to evictions, starvation, and harsh living conditions. The Irish now made up a quarter of the population in Boston, Massachusetts; New York City; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; and Baltimore, Maryland.

In 1879, the blight returned in force bringing the possibility of renewed starvation and further evictions in the west of Ireland. But by this time, farmers and laborers

throughout Ireland had become organized. Led by Charles Stewart Parnell, and the Land League and funded by donations from America, organized boycotts against notorious landlords, encouraged the defiant burning of leases, and had its members physically block evictions.