

The Famine - An Gorta Mor

Ireland is in your hands, in your power. If you do not save her, she cannot save herself. I solemnly call upon you to recollect that I predict with the sincerest conviction that a quarter of her population will perish unless you come to her relief.

Daniel O'Connell to the British House of Commons, 1847.

From the end of the 17th century, the population of Ireland, was steadily on the rise. Life expectancy was short, just 40 years for men. The Irish married young, girls at 16 and boys at a little higher. They had large families and infant mortality was quite high. For the most part the tenant Irish farmer or laborer lived in small mud cabins, one or two rooms, with no windows and usually not even a chimney. These meager homes were gathered in clusters called "Clachans." A dozen or more could live in one of these, also called "a mud hovel" sleeping on the floor on a bed of straw.



Most of the Irish land was owned by English and Anglo-Irish ruling class. Many were absentee landlords, who had little interest in the plight of their tenants except for how much rent was paid. Many hired middlemen who could raise the rents for their own profits. Mainly Protestant, they held titles to enormous tracts of land, confiscated long ago from native Irish Catholics. The tenant was also required to pay a "tithe" an annual support payment for the Established Church, of which they were not even members and for which they got nothing in return. As the population grew, the demand for any small piece of land grew, and with that growing demand so did the rents. Land was subdivided and subdivided and this resulted in small uneconomic holdings that did not even afford the tenant a sustainable standard of living.

The Irish Tenant was considered tenants-at-will and could be evicted on short notice at the whim of the landlord or his agents. By law, any improvements they made, such as building a stone house, became the property of the landlord. **Cottiers** were landless laborers who were allowed to live on a tenant's holding working in exchange for rent. They were allowed to build a small cabin and keep their own potato garden to feed their families. **Conacre** was another system whereby a landless laborer would rent a plot of land from a tenant to grow potatoes and give up a portion of the harvest in lieu

of rent. The constant threat of eviction, of anyone in the chain, removed any sense of security in the plight of the poor Irish Tenant farmer.



Potatoes are not native to Ireland but believed to have first come from South America.. They were taken back to Europe and eventually reached England. By the late 1500's, potatoes were introduced to Ireland where farmers quickly discovered they grew well in the cool moist soil with very little labor. An acre of potatoes field could yield 12 tons of potatoes, enough to feed a family of six for a year. By the 19th C. the potato was the staple diet of the Irish people. The tenant farmer raised pigs and corn for rent and except for milk from the family cow, he depended on the potato solely for food. By the mid-1800s, the density of Irish living on cultivated land was about 700 people per square mile, among the highest rate in Europe.

In 1800, about four million people lived in Ireland. By the autumn of 1845, when the Great Famine struck Ireland, there were at least nine million, some estimates exceed 11 million. There had been other years of famine in Irish history, but these had always been of limited duration, and confined smaller areas. The Great Famine lasted from 1845 to 1847, and crop failure encompassed the whole island. The blight first

destroyed crops on the eastern seaboard of America in 1842, then appeared in England in the summer of 1845. In September, the counties of Wexford and Waterford reported the disease. More than half the Irish potato crop failed in 1845. In 1846, the potato crop was a total failure.

The Famine began in September 1845 as leaves on potato plants turned black and rotted. The cause was an airborne fungus -*phytophthora infestans*- originally transported in ships traveling from North America to England. Winds from England carried the fungus to the south-east coast of Ireland. The blight spread throughout the fields as fungal spores settled on the leaves of healthy potato plants, multiplied and were carried in the millions by cool breezes to surrounding plants.

By October 1845, news of the blight had reached London. British Prime Minister, Sir Robert Peel suggested "repeal of the corn laws" a heavy tariff on imported grain but political opposition to anything that would remove protection for corn futures from the English Gentry was quickly squashed. As in the past, during food shortages, temporary measures were implemented by providing "Follies" work projects for the poor who were already beginning to die from hunger, starvation and disease. Workhouses were for the relief of poor, who were forced to give up their homes and tenancies, in exchange for an institutionalised shelter where families were separated into male and female communal living, robbing them of the family unit. Many chose

to die from hunger rather than enter these grim walls.

In the song the Fields of Athenry we hear of Trevelyan who saw to a part of the relief effort. Trevelyan was appointed by Prime Minister Peel to oversee relief operations in Ireland . He was stubborn, self-righteous, overly bureaucratic, and not given to a favorable opinion of the Irish. He only visited Ireland once during the famine venturing only as far as Dublin, far from the hard-hit west of Ireland.

Peel now attempted a solution of his own with the purchase of two shiploads inexpensive corn from America. Woefully mismanaged, not enough mills to turn it into an edible food source, lack of financial support amongst the landed gentry, and low in vitamin C, resulted in the Irish tenant getting scurvy and caused diarrhea for the consumer. The Relief Commission estimated that four million Irish would need to be fed during the spring and summer of 1846. But Peel had imported only about £100,000 worth of Indian corn from America and Trevelyan made no effort to replenish the limited supply.

The British government also did not interfere with the English-controlled export business in Irish-grown grains. Throughout the Famine years, large quantities of native-grown wheat, barley, oats and oatmeal sailed out of Irish ports for England, even though the Irish were dying of starvation.